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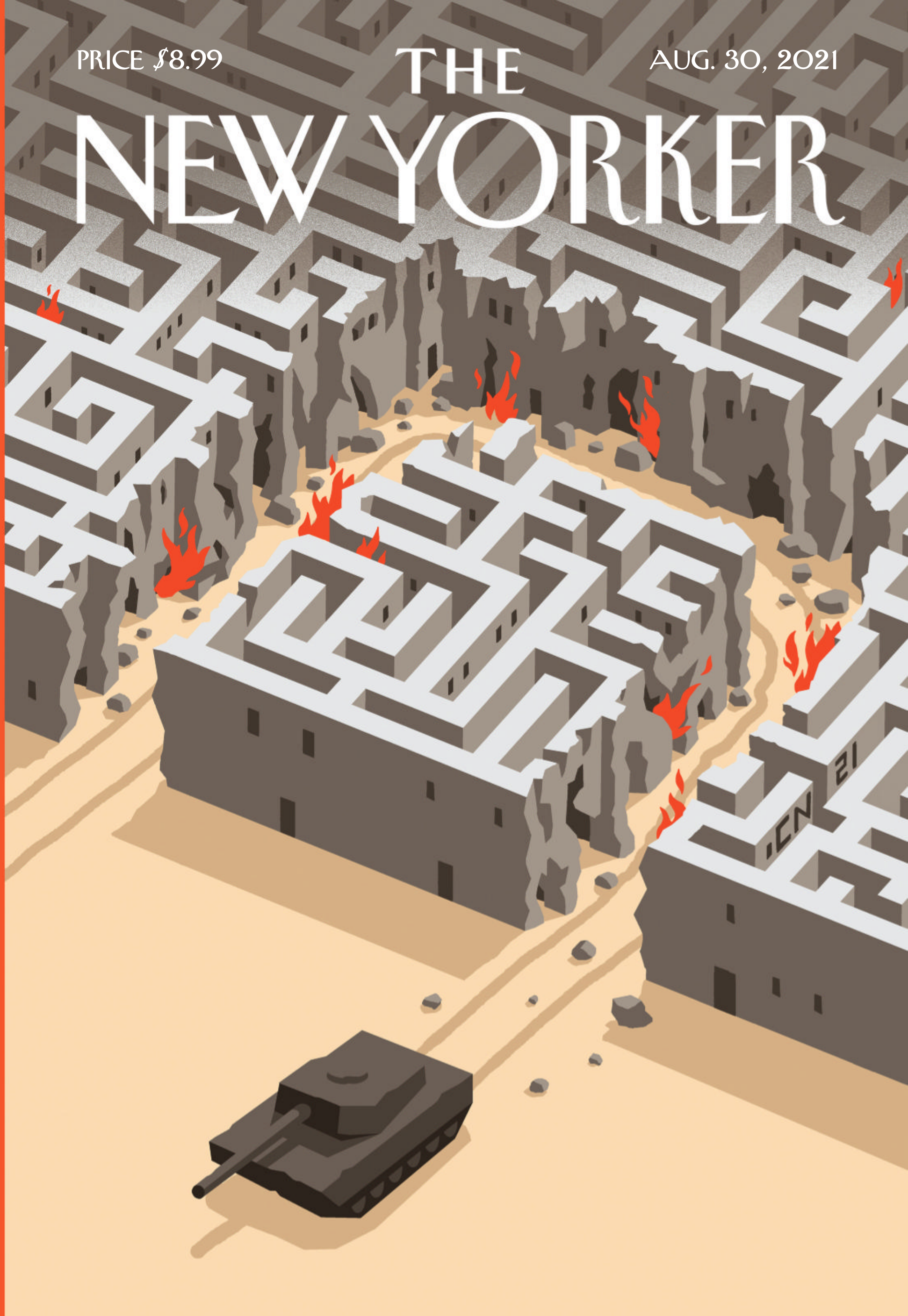
THE NEW YORKER

AUG. 30, 2021



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THE NEW YORKER

AUGUST 30, 2021

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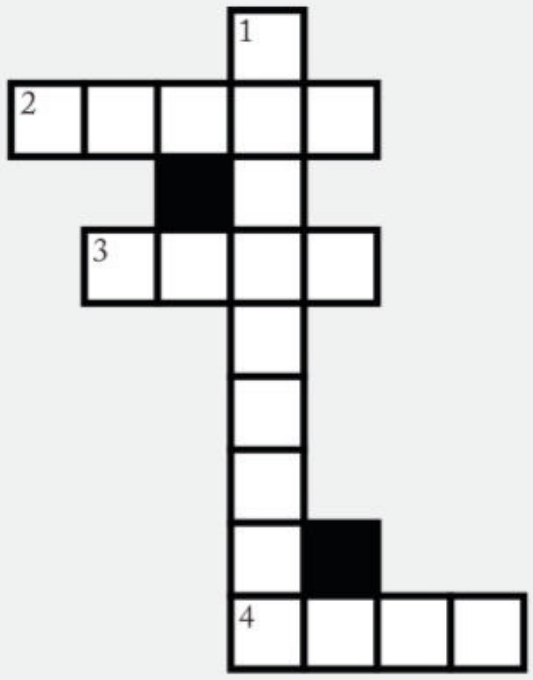
DRAWINGS *Sofia Warren, Amy Hwang, Jason Adam Katzenstein, Sam Gross, Emily Flake, Kendra Allenby, P. C. Vey, Ellis Rosen, Karl Stevens, Roz Chast, Carolita Johnson, Frank Cotham, Brendan Loper, Ali Solomon, Darrin Bell, Joe Dator* SPOTS *Antonio Giovanni Pinna*

PUZZLES & GAMES DEPT.

The New Yorker Crossword Puzzle



1. Plot device sometimes used in thrillers.
2. Bad stuff to microwave.
3. N.Y.C. club said to have catalyzed the punk movement.
4. Apt to snoop.

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THE NEW YORKER

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CONTRIBUTORS

Atul Gawande (*"The Costa Rica Model," p. 30*), a professor of public health and a surgeon, is the founder and chair of Ariadne Labs. He was recently nominated to be the assistant administrator for global health at the U.S. Agency for International Development.

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Robyn Weintraub (*Puzzles & Games Dept.*) has been constructing crossword puzzles since 2010.

Alex Dimitrov (*Poem, p. 56*) published his third collection, "Love and Other Poems," in February.

Rima Suqi (*The Talk of the Town, p. 14*), a freelance writer, is based in New York City.

Rebecca Mead (*"The C.E.O. of 'Succession,'" p. 42*) has been a staff writer since 1997. "My Life in Middlemarch" is her most recent book.

Zach Helfand (*"Kill the Umpire," p. 24*) is a member of *The New Yorker's* editorial staff.

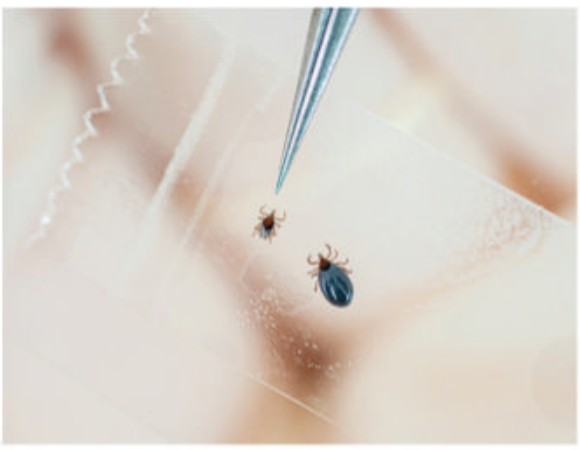
Christoph Niemann (*Cover*) published "Zoo," a collection of linocuts and drawings of animals at two Berlin zoos, in July.

Bessie Golding (*Poem, p. 49*), a poet and a biotechnologist, is at work on her first poetry collection, "Escapements."

George Saunders (*Fiction, p. 52*) won the 2017 Man Booker Prize for "Lincoln in the Bardo." He is the author of, most recently, "A Swim in a Pond in the Rain," a book of essays about the Russian short story.

Michael Luo (*Books, p. 65*), the editor of newyorker.com, is writing a book about the history of Chinese exclusion in America.

THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM



ANNALS OF MEDICINE

After delays resulting from public fears, a Lyme-disease vaccine is finally in the works, Sue Halpern writes.

ANNALS OF TECHNOLOGY

The cryptocurrency Skycoin was going to change the world and make users rich. Then it began to fall apart.

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LEFT: EDWIN REMSBURG / GETTY; RIGHT: NATA METLUKH

THE MAIL

QUEENS OF THE BOARD

Louisa Thomas's piece on the chess champion Hou Yifan highlights the unending comparison between female and male intelligence ("Queenside," August 2nd). From my perspective as a therapist in training, it seems that the obstacles that female chess players confront have much to do with the weight of a psychological phenomenon called "stereotype threat"—a situational predicament in which people feel themselves to be at risk of conforming to negative stereotypes of their social group. Studies have shown that stereotype-threat conditions, such as a standardized test of one's intellectual ability, can result in measurable deficits in performance. In the presence of the limiting notions—expressed by both female chess players and their male competitors—about women's "physical endurance" and their "nature," it is not surprising that female players may begin to feel doubt and anxiety, or that, as Thomas mentions, "many girls drop away from the more competitive tracks of the game when they reach high school." I applaud women like Hou who beat on against the current, but I also support the players who choose to explore other avenues for their talents.
Gabriella Hiatt
Warren, Conn.

DESIGNING WITH NATURE

Eric Klinenberg's article about the landscape architect Kate Orff characterizes her as being "at the forefront of an emerging approach to climate resilience that argues we should be building *with* nature, not just *in* nature" ("Manufacturing Nature," August 9th). The roots of this approach stretch back decades, and its lineage can be said to include Frank Lloyd Wright's commitment to "organic architecture." As an architecture student in the nineteen-seventies, I was introduced to "Design with Nature," by Ian McHarg, which was published in 1969. McHarg's work helped set the standard for how humanity should design with and relate to the environment. To quote from the book's introduction: "McHarg's emphasis is not on either design or nature by itself, but upon the preposition *with*, which implies human cooperation and biological partnership." As Orff's admirable work demonstrates, we are still learning how to make this connection today.
Len Zegarski
Professor of Architecture (retired)
NewSchool of Architecture and Design
San Diego, Calif.

THROUGH ANOTHER LENS

In his thoughtful review of "The New Woman Behind the Camera," at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Peter Schjeldahl speaks to the exhibition's "effect of heterogeneous images in flashing sequence" (The Art World, August 2nd). For all the diversity of the images and styles on display at the show, I was intrigued by the fact that practically every photographer's preferred subject was either people or outdoor scenes; animals do not seem to have been popular subjects during the early to mid-twentieth century. The only photographs featuring animals are Dora Maar's "Untitled [Boy with a Cat]" and "Cat + I," by Wanda Wulz, which, by blending a cat's face with Wulz's own, focusses on the playfully surreal possibilities of manipulation rather than on the animal. There is one photographer, a "New Woman" par excellence, who could have filled the niche of presenting animals as subjects: Ylla, born Camilla Koffler. Working in the same period as the other photographers, and acclaimed for her sensitive images of animals, Ylla foreshadowed a trend in more recent photography in which depictions of animals being themselves are fairly commonplace.
Tina Frühauf
New York City

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In an effort to slow the spread of the coronavirus, many New York City venues remain closed. Here's a selection of culture to be found around town, as well as online and streaming; as ever, it's advisable to check in advance to confirm engagements.

GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

Kaatsbaan Cultural Park, in Tivoli, New York, with its outdoor stage in the middle of a field and its view of the Catskills, has become a haven for dance. The first weekend of the **Kaatsbaan Summer Festival** (Aug. 28-Sept. 12) features three commissions choreographed by women—Gemma Bond, Lauren Lovette, and Claire Davison. Jose Sebastian and Chloe Misseldine (above), both from American Ballet Theatre, perform in Bond's new ballet; it's set to Rachmaninoff's Thirteen Preludes for piano, played live by Cecile Licad.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MARCO GIANNAVOLA

MUSIC

Alarm Will Sound

CLASSICAL One artist's homage to another's work needn't mimic its forebear stylistically; divergence can be just as telling. Tyshawn Sorey was moved to write "For George Lewis," named for the trailblazing composer and improviser with whom he studied, after hearing "The Will to Adorn," Lewis's exuberantly spangled paean to Black self-expression. Sorey, like Lewis, focusses on how expressive gestures register and resonate across time. But Sorey's music unfolds at a more stately pace, floating contemplatively for close to an hour. Alarm Will Sound performs "For George Lewis" on Sunday, to end the Time:Spans festival, and issues a sublime studio recording of the work on Aug. 27.—*Steve Smith (DiMenna Center for Classical Music; Aug. 29 at 7:30.)*

DVS1

ELECTRONIC The Minneapolis-bred d.j. and producer DVS1, born Zak Khutoretsky, made his name as a regular at the Berlin techno spot Berghain. On the decks, he doesn't so much play recordings as manipulate the sound system itself, microscopically isolating and looping the most exciting aspect of each punishing groove and, with EQ and effects, milking it for everything it's worth, before seamlessly moving on to the next. This week, he performs at BASEMENT with the New York d.j. Volvox.—*Michaelangelo Matos (Aug. 28.)*

Lee Morgan: "The Complete Live at the Lighthouse"

JAZZ Thanks to the 2016 documentary "I Called Him Morgan," the magisterial trumpeter Lee Morgan may now be known to a general audience as that young jazzman who was shot dead on the bandstand by his jealous common-law wife. Notorious fame aside, Morgan would be better remembered as one of the most inventive, propulsive, and soulful improvisers in the country during his most fertile period: from 1956 until his ignominious passing, in 1972. Recorded in 1970, "The Complete Live at the Lighthouse" is an exhaustive eight-disk set that adds four hours of unreleased music to the album "Live at the Lighthouse," released that same year. Still riding the popularity of "The Sidewinder," his hit 1964 recording, Morgan was at the helm of a particularly agile band that included the undervalued tenor saxophonist Bennie Maupin. The leader's trumpet and flugelhorn solos—as melodically sharp and tonally robust as they are rhythmically fluid—burst forth, suggesting all that Morgan still had to contribute, had he been granted more time.—*Steve Futterman*

Outline: Summer

FESTIVAL Splashy music festivals habitually plop jumbles of boldface names in fields and amphitheatres, but Outline follows an artsier blueprint: adventurous performers luring aesthetes to a reclaimed industrial space. Launched in the pre-pandemic sliver of 2020, Outline is the marquee music event for Knockdown Center, a hulking factory turned arts space in Maspeth, Queens. This summer edition spreads eleven artists across two distinct bills in the venue's back-yard area, the Ruins. The opening show belongs to the headliner ESG—a fascinating band, born in the South Bronx of the late seventies, whose oft-sampled records bridge uptown grooves and downtown post-punk. ESG's spare beat serves as a through line for the event's artists, from the dynamic Sudanese American rapper Dua Saleh and the futuristic electronic musician Body Meat (Aug. 28) to the off-center producer Galcher Lustwerk and the art-pop vocalist Jessy Lanza, who close out the festival the following evening.—*Jay Ruttenberg (Knockdown Center; Aug. 28-29.)*

"What Lies Beneath"

OPERA The dénouement of Benjamin Britten's "Billy Budd," in which the good and beauteous title character is hanged, hinges upon British naval law, which established so-called order on the open seas. (When Ruth Bader Ginsburg saw the show at Santa Fe Opera, in 2008, she told the cast backstage that she would have let Billy go.) An undertow of chaos or threat is never far from the scores of "Billy Budd," Ralph Vaughan Williams's "Riders to the Sea," and Anthony Davis's "Amistad," and On Site Opera uses selections from each of these nautical tales in its immersive musical experience "What Lies Beneath." Taking place aboard the nineteenth-century tall ship Wavertree, now a part of the South Street Seaport Museum, the work presents a group of singers and pianists in six vignettes drawn from seafaring stories and the transatlantic slave trade.—*Oussama Zahr (Aug. 28-Sept. 2.)*

THE THEATRE

Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival

"The Tempest" is a beautiful, exciting, and fitting production to conclude the festival's thirty-four-year tenure at Boscobel. (The company is decamping to a nearby, equally glorious setting along the Hudson next season.) Under the incisive direction of Ryan Quinn, and with thrilling choreography by Susannah Millonzi, the play, Shakespeare's last, opens with the titular storm expressionistically illustrated with the help of a Nina Simone recording—she'll make another dramatic contribution later—and the energy and artistry never flag. Three key roles

HIP-HOP

ILLUSTRATION BY RACHELLE BAKER

The Brownsville rapper Ka has put together one of the most astonishing independent careers in hip-hop history. His music is mostly self-produced; for many years, he paid for twelve-hour studio sessions with money made working overtime as a firefighter, mailing out his own records to fans as a one-man shop. Ka's voice is gruff, yet he raps discreetly, as if recounting secrets under his breath. The verses themselves are almost like incantations muttered in code; it takes intent listening to puzzle them out. His wordplay is its own sort of quicksand, shiftily multisyllabic and crowded by entendre. On his sixth solo album, **"A Martyr's Reward,"** Ka lays out his accumulated experiences, seeking recompense for his sacrifices. More than any of his other albums, this one is fixated on what is owed—by culture vultures, by cops, by the American government. It considers what Ka owes others, too, both those he grew up with and those he now performs for. He has never sounded more certain of his purpose. —*Sheldon Pearce*

OFF BROADWAY

The playwright and director Richard Nelson débuted his intimate "Rhinebeck Panorama" series of plays in 2010, starting with "That Hopey Changey Thing," which followed the fictional Apple family on the night of the midterm elections—the same night that the play opened. After four Apple installments, Nelson added two more imagined families, the Gabriels and the Michaels, and last year the Apples returned for a trio of Zoom plays. Though many of the scripts are anchored to political events, the news is just background in the lives of the characters, who are often seen preparing for a family meal. There are no screaming matches; Nelson is interested in incidental joys and sorrows. The twelfth and final play of the series, **"What Happened?: The Michaels Abroad,"** finds that clan of artists in France for a dance festival, grappling with the pandemic and the loss of their matriarch. The Hunter Theatre Project production begins on Aug. 28, at the Frederick Loewe Theatre, and features members of Nelson's recurring ensemble, including Maryann Plunkett and Jay O. Sanders.—*Michael Schulman*

are superbly filled. Britney Simpson's Ariel is a marvel of physical sprightliness and musical and emotional heft. The same could be said of Jason O'Connell's Caliban, a damaged monster with a poetic soul and a voice that ranges from beastly growl to soaring song. And Howard W. Overshown powerfully embodies the complex Prospero, struggling within himself between violence and mercy, revenge and forgiveness. Shakespeare's ruminations on the evanescence of experience are magically given life on this fantastic island.—*Ken Marks (hvshakespeare.org; through Sept. 4.)*

Merry Wives

The Public Theatre's Shakespeare in the Park reopens the Delacorte Theatre with Jocelyn Bioh's adaptation of Shakespeare's "The Merry Wives of Windsor," relocating the play to a West African corner of present-day Harlem. The production, directed by Saheem Ali, doesn't redeem the play's faults; the comedy is still broad, the characters as flat as poster-board puppets. It does, however, yield new strengths. When Bioh's Johnny Falstaff (Jacob Ming-Trent), dressed in a Tupac T-shirt that leaves none of his ample paunch to the imagination, declares that the wives "shall be sugar mamas to me," the familiar phrase carries us suddenly back to the New World of Shakespeare's time, where the brutal sugar business, fuelled by European demand, stoked the transatlantic slave trade and set the stage for the world we know now. A lot of the play is a good time, but too much still sags. Ali's largely static direction of this nearly two-hour-long, intermissionless piece has too many deflating pauses and leans heavily on exaggerated gestures—belly clutches, lascivious glances—to signal humor rather than to create it. Much of the production's delight lies in its scenic design, by Beowulf Boritt, which charms by bringing the sidewalks, braiding salons, and laundromats of Harlem into Central Park, and—sacrilege!—the best moments come when Bioh shakes off Shakespeare altogether to riff on the contemporary.—*Alexandra Schwartz (Reviewed in our issue of 8/23/21.) (Through Sept. 18.)*

Semblance

Technically, this piece, at New York Theatre Workshop, is a movie, but, as staged by the playwright and director Whitney White, in a room flanked by long curtains of silver tinsel, it feels like theatre. On two large screens, sometimes mirroring each other, sometimes diverging, Nikiya Mathis performs a prerecorded series of monologues by seven Black women—one getting her nails done, another preparing to deliver a political speech, another behind the counter at Sweetgreen. Or are they all incarnations of one woman with seven or more possible lives? With her piercing eye contact and uncanny poise, Mathis is a master of the closeup, that most filmic of angles. As shot by Jess Coles, with music by JJJJJerome Ellis, costumes by Qween Jean, and hair by Dhairius Thomas, the combined effect is absolutely hypnotic.—*Rollo Romig (nytw.org; through Aug. 29.)*

DANCE

"Beach Sessions Dance Series"

In previous years, this series at Rockaway Beach has featured such gambits as rake trucks in formation and a mass of people doing the hustle in the sand. This summer, the conceptually minded choreographer Moriah Evans is planning something at once simpler and more ambitious. In "REPOSE," on Aug. 29, twenty-one terrific dancers make a five-hour trek across more than a mile of shoreline, beginning at Beach Eighty-sixth Street and culminating, at Beach 110th Street, in a sound performance by David Watson. The idea is to mimic—and thus frame and comment on—ordinary beach activity. The public is invited to participate, either by following instructions, available at beachsessionsdanceseries.com, or by just showing up.—*Brian Seibert*

Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival

Saving ballet for last, the venerable dance festival in Becket, Massachusetts, closes out the summer, Aug. 25-29, with "Ballet Coast to Coast," a meetup of three companies from around the country: Boston Ballet, Houston Ballet, and Pacific Northwest Ballet. Each presents one work from its repertory; "Reflections," an elegant and sleek ballet full of complex geometries, created by Justin Peck for Houston Ballet, in 2019, is sure to be a highlight. Then all join in to perform "Second to Last," by Alejandro Cerrudo, P.N.B.'s choreographer-in-residence. The performances are held on the Pillow's outdoor stage, with its magnificent view of the Berkshires.—*Marina Harss (jacobspillow.org)*

NYC Free

The free festival on Little Island continues. On Aug. 25, Georgina Pazcoguin, a New York City Ballet soloist and the author of the recent tell-all memoir "Swan Dive," curates her own program. It features her in a new work by Hope Boykin, as well as performances by the kathak dancer Brinda Guha and Danielle Agami's company Ate9. Later that evening, Ronald K. Brown directs attention to choreographers other than himself: Drew Dollaz, Jennifer Newman, and Omari Wiles. On Aug. 28, Keerati Jinakunwiphat and Full Circle Souljahs dance short excerpts, then teaching artists from New Victory Theatre guide inspired audience members to dance in response.—*B.S. (littleisland.org)*

ILLUSTRATION BY JOEY YU

ART

"Dawoud Bey: An American Project"

One of the earliest pictures in the Whitney's concise and thrilling retrospective of this Black photographer's forty-five-year career is "Three Women at a Parade," from 1978. The portrait's elegant, elderly subjects, who are dressed for the occasion in ladylike hats, seem oblivious to Bey's camera, absorbed in festivities beyond the frame. What emerges is a portrait of inner lives—of women seeing as much as being seen. The image is part of "Harlem, U.S.A.," the artist's first series, made nimbly in the streets using a handheld 35-mm. camera; it earned him his first solo show, at the Studio Museum in Harlem, in 1979. For subsequent projects, many of them in color, the Chicago-based artist has turned to more methodical, large-format cameras (including a two-hundred-pound Polaroid). The question of how a photograph can honor a subject that vision can't register remains at the heart of Bey's work, notably in the magnificent "Night Coming Tenderly, Black," from 2017, a series of penumbral black-and-white landscapes, made at sites in Ohio along the Underground Railroad, that convey both the nighttime fear of a fugitive and the beauty of freedom.—*Andrea K. Scott (whitney.org)*

"Interior Scroll or What I Did on My Vacation"

This delightful constellation of works by seventeen artists (some working collaboratively), installed in the back room of the Broadway gallery, identifies intergenerational strains of transgressive mischief. The show is part of a sprawling endeavor organized by Soft Network, founded by the curator Chelsea Spengemann and the artist Sara VanDerBeek. Other components include the excellent film series "Artists on Camera, 1967-2021" (available on demand at metrograph.com) and various events in East Hampton, New York—the original location of the fabled feminist performance piece "Interior Scroll," which lends this exhibition its name. In August, 1975, in front of a largely female audience, the artist Carolee Schneemann unfurled a scathing text—a takedown of a male filmmaker's pretensions—from her vagina and read it aloud. The piece is represented here by a black-and-white photograph; another black-and-white picture, of a young man with a knowing grin, shot by Alvin Baltrop at the gay cruising grounds of Manhattan's West Side piers sometime between 1976 and 1985, also feels like a curatorial muse. The octogenarian painter Juanita McNeely's pained but never humorless figurative canvases from the mid-eighties are always a treat to see, and a new print from Alisha B. Wormsley's ongoing series "There Are Black People in the Future," documenting a pair of rusted stakes and a battered cassette tape, among other artifacts, underscores the show's mood of radical time travel.—*Johanna Fateman (broadwaygallery.nyc)*

Marcia Schvartz

The first U.S. retrospective of this Argentine artist, on view at 55 Walker—a joint venture of the Bortolami, Kaufmann Repetto, and Andrew Kreps galleries—is cause for excitement. Between 1976 and 2018, Schvartz applied a range of styles, both figurative and abstract, to subjects as diverse as flower stalks and supernatural visitations. But portraiture seems to be her true north. Argentina's seven-year rule by military dictatorship, which began in 1976, was a formative rupture for the artist. Targeted by the junta for her politics and associations—Schvartz's family owned a progressive bookstore—and increasingly frightened as her contemporaries disappeared, the painter fled to Spain, and then to Brazil, before finally returning home, in 1983. Antiauthoritarianism is implicit in her sensitive depictions of working-class and countercultural figures in the San Telmo neighborhood of Buenos Aires—the attenuated forms of Egon Schiele and the acerbic social realism of Jack Levine both echo in these pictures. Schvartz casts an especially radical eye on the female form, as seen here in the frankly unfeminine, open-legged pose featured in "Desnuda y con Zoquetes" ("Nude with Socks"), from 2012, and a pair of fantastic self-portraits, which suggest a subversive inner life—wryly penetrating and unapologetically morose.—*J.F. (kaufmannrepetto.com)*

IN THE MUSEUMS

© SHAHZIA SIKANDER / COURTESY THE ARTIST AND SEAN KELLY

The Morgan Library's knockout show **"Shahzia Sikander: Extraordinary Realities"** (on view through Sept. 26) surveys the first fifteen years of this remarkable Pakistani American artist's career, and it's hard to imagine it being any better. Sikander, who was born in Lahore in 1969, first became adept at Indo-Persian miniature painting while studying at Pakistan's National College of Arts. Historically, such miniatures detailed aspects of life in the Mughal Empire—scenes of court, landscapes, battles, religious subjects—and were kept in albums for private use and pleasure. When Sikander moved to the United States, in 1993, to pursue an M.F.A. at the Rhode Island School of Design (which organized this exhibition in collaboration with the Morgan), she began brilliantly upending traditional narratives in her work, delving into new political and emotional territories: the ramifications of Islam on her life as a woman, and how best to articulate her experience as an immigrant. With her fine, sure hand, Sikander also uses surrealism to skewer Western ideas of exoticism. In such exceptional pieces as "Pleasure Pillars," from 2001 (pictured above), made with vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor, and tea on *wasli* paper (a material favored by miniature painters for centuries), she expertly frames the chaos and the questions about faith, history, and ideology that dominate both her native land and her adopted home.—*Hilton Als*

MOVIES

Gentlemen Broncos

In Jared Hess's wildly inventive and genre-swirling 2009 comedy, Benjamin (Michael Angarano), a lonely teen-ager being home-schooled by his poor single mother (Jennifer Coolidge) in a dome-shaped house in a town somewhere west of the Rockies, salves his soul by writing and illustrating whacked-out sci-fi fantasy stories. When he enters one in a contest, his idol, the popular novelist Ronald Chevalier (Jemaine Clement), steals the story and passes it off as his own. Meanwhile, two threadbare filmmakers (Halley Feiffer and Héctor Jiménez) also get hold of the property. Astonishingly, Hess turns this fable-like premise into a juvenile but grand-scale vision of Heaven and Earth. The small and pious town is filled with Bosch-like grotesques and jolting details (such as a store's lingerie department facing its gun counter), but it's transfigured by Hess's parallel worlds: Chevalier's supercilious version of Benjamin's story and the teen filmmakers' cheesy one are set against cosmic, transcendent—and ridiculously jejune—scenes from Benjamin's own imagination. The events are overseen by a stranger dressed in white: Dusty (Mike White, who also co-produced), Benjamin's guardian angel. Hess blends local color with celestial inspiration to create a forthright and original religious vision.—*Richard Brody (Streaming on Amazon, Apple TV, and other services.)*

In Search of a Midnight Kiss

This 2008 film, written and directed by Alex Holdridge, is a romantic comedy, of sorts, although most of the comedy winds up eating away at the romance. It stars Scoot McNairy as a bored and bloodless slacker named Wilson, who is adrift in Los Angeles. Most of the story takes place on New Year's Eve, which Wilson spends first in the company of his housemates (Brian McGuire and Katie Luong) and then, more haltingly, with Vivian (Sara Simmonds), who lies somewhere between a blind date and a booby trap. The two of them traipse around the city, rendered in lustrous monochrome; its beauty, however, seems to pass them by, just as any more than a hint of emotional connection tends to unnerve them. You wonder why either of them would want to spend time (especially a festive occasion) with the other, and much of their fierce dismay at the world comes across as whining, backed by a plaintive soundtrack; yet there is something oddly touching, in the end, about these lost kids who play at grownup life.—*Anthony Lane (Reviewed in our issue of 8/4/08.) (Streaming on Sundance Now.)*

Isabella

The prolific young Argentine director Matías Piñeiro is Shakespeare-obsessed, which is to say that he's also obsessed with theatre and with performance as such, and his new film—centered on a planned production of "Measure for Measure"—leaps through time, and through a variety of plays, with grace, whimsy, and passion. Mariel (María Villar), a thirty-eight-year-old actress in Buenos Aires who's seven months pregnant, auditions for the lead role of Isabella in a staging of the play. It's a strange audition, for which she needs to deliver a personal monologue, and she builds one around an incident that had occurred some time ago, in Córdoba, involving her brother (Pablo Sigal) and his partner (Agustina Muñoz), an actress who's also auditioning for the role. Meanwhile, Mariel has written a personal and surreal play (its striking imagery recurs throughout the movie) about the problem of doubt, even as she herself wonders whether she'll ever act again. Shattering Shakespeare into shards of personal experience, rhythmically repeating scenes and actions in a sort of cinematic music, and catching actors in highly inflected closeups, Piñeiro fuses performance and daily life into a quietly mighty architecture of psychological complexity.—*R.B. (In theatrical release at Film at Lincoln Center.)*

Respect

Jennifer Hudson's impassioned and energetic incarnation of Aretha Franklin is the anchor of this carefully managed yet engaging bio-pic, directed by Liesl Tommy. The drama follows Franklin's life from the traumas of her childhood—the death of her mother, her rape by an older man, her pregnancy at twelve—through the anguish, in adulthood, over the severe control of her career and her life exerted by her father, the Reverend C. L. Franklin (Forest Whitaker), and then by her first husband, Ted White (Marlon Wayans). The through line of the script, written by Tracey Scott Wilson from a story by Callie Khouri, is Franklin's longtime effort to make music as she sees fit, both as a singer and as her own producer, at the risk of physical and emotional violence. The film is at its most detailed and inspired in sequences dramatizing Franklin's behind-the-scenes artistry; her involvement with the civil-rights movement and her struggle with alcoholism figure in the action, but, despite the actors' fine-grained and vigorous performances, most of the scenes merely skim the surface informationally.—*R.B. (In theatrical release.)*

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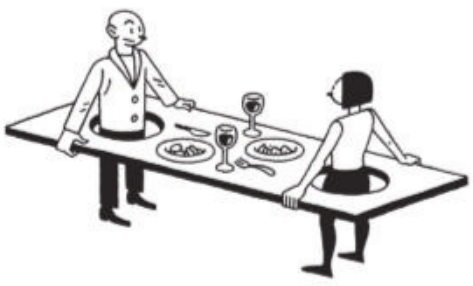
WHAT TO STREAM

COURTESY HBO

Nanfu Wang's new documentary, **"In the Same Breath"** (streaming on HBO Max), is a passionately personal reflection on the pandemic and a boldly analytical investigation of its mishandling, both in her native China and in the United States, where she lives. In January, 2020, Wang was visiting family in her home town, two hundred miles from Wuhan, as China continued to deny the coronavirus's severity; upon returning home to New Jersey, she discovered the truth of the outbreak through Wuhan residents' desperate social-media posts. To pursue her inquiry into their experiences, Wang commissioned cinematographers to film in Wuhan; this footage, made at great risk—including in ambulances, hospitals, and cemeteries—along with interviews with Chinese citizens, reveals the vast scope of official coverups in China and the brutal repression that sustains them. Yet, in the United States, she was shocked to discover the prevalence of similar official falsehoods—despite the freedom of the press—and the silencing of health-care professionals amid widespread mismanagement. Wang reveals, along with the medical crisis, another, related danger: the temptation of people everywhere to embrace authoritarianism and its lies as a response to complex and terrifying realities.—*Richard Brody*



TABLES FOR TWO

Crabs All Around

Care for some crab? You're in luck: there are now dozens of crab-boil restaurants in the city—and scores around the country—where you can eat a bounty of crab legs, and shrimp and crawfish and lobster, boiled and sloshed in butter and some medley of spices, served in a plastic bag, to be cracked with your own plastic-glove-encased hands and devoured, along with any number of fried foods and brightly colored alcoholic drinks. But long before these restaurants, many with an Asian-Cajun bent, began popping up all over (seemingly overnight, at some point in the past few years, in a wave possibly set off by Vietnamese American entrepreneurs in the South specializing in Cajun crawfish), there was the Crabby Shack, a sweet little spot on Franklin Avenue, in Crown Heights.

Perhaps one of the reasons that the Crabby Shack, a counter-service restaurant that offers all manner of crab, feels so pure in purpose, so true to itself, is that it was born of memories of crabs past. In 2013, Gwen Woods had been working in A. & R. at Sean Combs's Bad Boy Records for two decades, and Fifi Bell-Clanton had been a fashion stylist for about as long. They both missed the crab they used to eat: for Bell-Clanton, in Philadelphia, at such neighborhood spots as Baltimore Crab & Seafood, Bottom of the Sea, and Mr. Crab; for Woods, in the Chesapeake Bay area, brought home by her father from Virginia.

Amazed by New York City's lack of crab places and looking for a career change, they put together a business plan and, in 2014, opened the aptly named Crabby Shack—casual and beachy, with a nautical design and welcoming service. As Bell-Clanton told me the other day, they wanted people to "feel like they were being transported to a destination in Nantucket or the South of France or Miami."

The pandemic proved to be a difficult test—they operated for stretches with limited crews and recently added a take-out window for ease of to-go orders. But the Crabby Shack was one of the few crab restaurants that stayed open through the pandemic, and it gained a new customer base as a result, offering a convincing argument for crab as an any-day indulgence. On a recent Saturday night, a steady stream of diners gathered at outdoor tables, sipping I.P.A.s from the fridge and feasting on crab rolls (perfectly seasoned in a subtle garlic-butter sauce, generously heaped on toasted Martin's potato rolls), crab-leg clusters (elegant, clean-tasting Alaskan snow crab steamed then swirled in garlic butter, or fat, succulent Dungeness, surprisingly easy to crack, in creamy curry sauce), crab-avocado B.L.T.s, luscious crab mac and cheese.

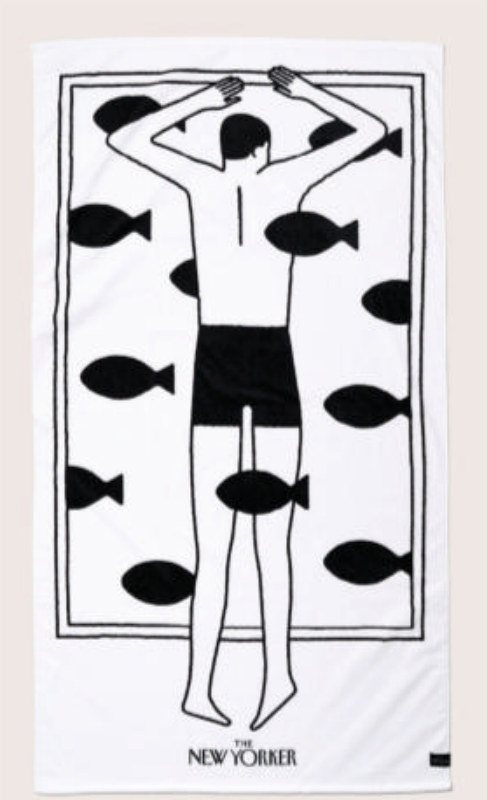
"Now that so many crab restaurants are opening," Woods said, "we're competing with five other restaurants in the neighborhood. Crab is now a thing. It's exploded." One silver lining, for Woods and Bell-Clanton, is that their finesse with seafood and their savvy regarding the culinary Zeitgeist—their menu includes a popular lobster roll and a hybrid "clobster" roll, with both crab and lobster—has earned them a coveted vender slot at Barclays Center, and a booming lobster-roll-delivery gig via Goldbelly.

Meanwhile, at Sup Crab—a mini franchise among the city's now legion Asian-Cajun crab places, with branches on the Bowery and, recently, in Greenpoint—the crab gets a Sichuan twist. Sup Crab offers two staple Cajun sauces (mild tomato or spicy) with its seafood boils—a mix-and-match choice of shrimp, clams, baby cuttlefish, crawfish, lobster, and snow, king, or Dungeness crab—but it's the restaurant's Sup Crab House sauce that's worth seeking out. A blend of butter, garlic, and ground Sichuan peppercorn, it starts as warming and ends up thrilling—an excellent accompaniment to tender, fresh king crab, extracted from giant legs snipped into manageable pieces, the better to swipe through the sauce. Paired with a Purple Galaxy cocktail, made with vodka and pea-flower syrup, and tangy Cajun-sausage-studded fried rice dusted with more magic Sichuan peppercorn, it's the party we've been waiting for. *(The Crabby Shack boils $14–$42. Sup Crab boils start around $20.)*

—Shauna Lyon

PHOTOGRAPH BY MYLES LOFTIN FOR THE NEW YORKER; ILLUSTRATION BY JOOST SWARTE

THE NEW YORKER STORE



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THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
WHAT WE LEFT BEHIND

In the fall of 2001, as the United States and its allies swept into Afghanistan, the Taliban collapsed with surprising speed. Although the Taliban Army was largely intact in many places, its soldiers often simply walked across the lines and switched sides. The victorious fighters of the American-backed militia, the Northern Alliance, frequently embraced the surrendering Talibs, as if welcoming wayward family members back into the fold.

This summer, the same phenomenon played out in reverse. The soldiers of the Afghan Army surrendered, not because they were defeated but because they could see which way the wind was blowing. Why go on? After forty-two years of war, the Afghans are expert at survival. In 2001, America's leaders were happily surprised; in 2021, they were dismayed.

As Taliban leaders took hold of the country, they suggested that they had changed since the nineteen-nineties, when they became notorious for stoning women to death and toppling brick walls on people accused of homosexuality. A spokesman announced that "no prejudice against women will be allowed." An official named Mawlawi Abdulhaq Hemad agreed to be interviewed by a female anchor on the TOLO News channel. "I am still astonished that people are afraid of the Taliban," he said.

Placing any credence in these assurances would be a fool's game. Even if Taliban leaders are sincere, their movement is riven by factions. While Hemad was being interviewed, men in the streets were painting over posters that depicted women's faces. In newly conquered areas, fighters have conducted door-to-door searches, executing people thought to have collaborated with the Western-backed government. In the cosmopolitan bubble of Kabul, the Talibs were greeted less as a liberating army than as a kind of theocratic motorcycle gang: rough armed men rolling into town, demanding allegiance.

When the Taliban last seized the capital, in 1996, Afghanistan was emerging from decades of desolation. A withering occupation by the Soviet Union had killed more than a million people, and the civil war that followed killed at least fifty thousand more. The populace was impoverished and illiterate, and the cities lay in ruins. In Kabul, the busiest place in town was a Red Cross clinic, run by a kind-hearted Italian expatriate, which made prosthetics for amputees. The men were mostly dead or at the front; the women, invisible behind burqas, picked through debris in search of scraps; and packs of orphans roamed the streets. The Taliban's ministries were run by ideologues who did little in the way of governance. But, if Kabul was desolate, it was also peaceful, and its weary citizens were grateful for that.

In the invasion of 2001, the United States destroyed the Afghan state, such as it was. The initial goal was a simple one: to avoid a recurrence of the September 11th attacks, directed by Al Qaeda terrorists living under Taliban protection. But even the most basic sort of counterterrorism requires a government, and so a government had to be built. Diplomats and commanders were eager to erect a democratic state, and aid workers set about building schools, irrigation networks, and roads. Billions of dollars were stolen and thrown away. Yet the country was remade, especially the cities; Kabul became a bustling metropolis, with high-rises and French and Lebanese restaurants. Millions of Afghan girls, barred by the Taliban from attending school, found their lives transformed.

The Americans and their partners were happy to dole out money, but they stopped short of directing the country. They didn't know the languages, anyway. Desperate for allies, they turned to the strongest Afghans immediately available: the cynical, battle-hardened commanders who had risen through the chaos of the past two decades. The combination of warlords and American largesse, sanctified by Western-style elections, produced a state whose leaders' main objective was to get hold of as much foreign money as possible. Enriched by graft,

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

the Afghan élite began spending weekends in the United Arab Emirates, where they gathered in posh villas on an island called Palm Jumeirah. American officials had a droll name for the phenomenon: vertically integrated criminal enterprise, or VICE. The Afghan state, venal and predatory, became the main driver of Taliban recruitment.

The group's other primary support came from Pakistan. Intelligence officials there, who had helped mobilize the Taliban in the nineties, helped them regroup and plan attacks after the American invasion. This was a transparent double game, but successive U.S. Presidents—especially Bush and Obama—refused to confront Pakistan in a meaningful way. Instead, they poured resources into defeating the Taliban on the battlefield. As the American effort became increasingly militarized, the war submerged the good works, and Afghan support began to drain away.

In recent weeks, the United States' hasty, ill-planned withdrawal did the Taliban one last favor. By bringing chaos to the capital and abandoning those who had risked their lives to aid the U.S., it surely inspired many Afghans to wish for someone to restore order. But the cities that the Taliban now control bear little resemblance to the ones they left twenty years ago. The urban population, perhaps a quarter of the country, is energized by a contingent of sophisticated young people—fluent not just in Dari and Pashto but also in smartphones, the Internet, and travel to the West. Even in the countryside, many women and girls have known far more freedom than their mothers did.

The U.S. failed to build a functioning state in Afghanistan. Instead, it fostered a state within a state—outposts of relative liberalism in an otherwise deeply conservative country. Now these outposts will have to rejoin the rest, either by unlikely compromise or by ruthless force. The Taliban have numbers on their side. They are primarily ethnic Pashtuns, who represent nearly half of the population—in the countryside, a dominant force. But the remaining Afghans, including Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Turkomen, have their own allegiances, some standing with the Taliban and some against them. The former Vice-President Amrullah Saleh, a Tajik, has declared himself the nation's rightful leader, and he commands a loyal group of armed men. A resolution without bloodshed is difficult to imagine.

As the Biden Administration recklessly departed Afghanistan, it left behind the chance of a deeper calamity, not just in the country but in the region. The President's embarrassing speech last week, in which he blamed the debacle on everyone but himself, serves as a fitting end to America's twenty-year endeavor. As Biden withdrew his forces, he urged Afghans to fight for their country's future. It seems alarmingly possible that they will have to.

—Dexter Filkins

LEAVING KABUL
FLIGHT

Two weeks ago, we had a film festival for short avant-garde films in Kabul. Four hundred people were there. They were dressed normally, like European artists, in jeans and bras and T-shirts. People laughed, sang, smoked, watched films. We didn't know that suddenly, within days, everything would collapse.

It was really normal life: girls walked in the streets freely, and they went to coffee shops. One of the beauties of Kabul is watching the girls walk to school. Their uniform is a white head scarf, and the dress is black. I always say, I hope that we can see this image forever, you know?

The Taliban was in other big cities, like Kandahar, Mazar-i-Sharif, but they weren't in Kabul. We thought that our Army would defend us. We were chanting, "*Allahu akbar*, God is great," just to protest against the Taliban. We were chanting to support our Army forces. I didn't believe that the Taliban would come. Maybe I am naïve. I don't know.

I'm thirty-seven. I was born in Kabul, I grew up in Iran, and immigrated to Slovakia to study. When I finished a Ph.D. in filmmaking, I decided to return to Afghanistan. I thought that it is better to be telling stories from my own country than to be in Europe and make stories that aren't very close to me. My film "Hava, Maryam, Ayesha," a story of three women in Kabul, played at the Venice Film Festival in 2019.

On Sunday, I wanted to go to the bank and get cash. I made my coffee and prepared myself: I put on lipstick and a very short dress. I took a taxi. Traffic was bad. At the bank I saw maybe five hundred people. Around fifty were women. You could understand that there was something happening: the bank was full of fear. The teller said, "There is no money—we are waiting for the central bank to send us money." Suddenly, the gunshots started. And the manager of the bank told me, "The Taliban is inside the city. They've surrounded us. You should go home." He said, "If they know you, they will kill you." I am well known there. He showed me the back door, and I started to run.

I was running, and in the middle of my running some people made fun of me, especially the men: "Oh, the director of Afghan film is running! She is afraid of the Taliban! Ha ha ha!" I was surprised. Some girls were just walking. I said to them, "Why are you walking? The Taliban is coming!" And they started running, too.

At home, I looked out my window, and everything was calm. Still, I said, I'm going to the airport. I had spoken with my friend Wanda Adamík Hrycová, the president of the Slovak Film and Television Academy, who told me she'd ask the government of Ukraine to help.

Sahraa Karimi

I packed some of my things—clothes, iPhone, toothbrush, seven books. I tried not to look at my paintings, because I knew I could not take them. I left them behind, along with my library, a hard drive with three thousand films, all my makeup, four birds. All I left behind.

My cousin showed up in a black American pickup to take us to the airport. Twelve people, eight suitcases: two colleagues, my brother's family. Five children, all girls—twenty, fourteen, eleven, seven, and two. I told them, "You are going on a very interesting journey. You should be very strong." I was crying.

At the airport, there were a huge number of people waiting for flights. You could see something in their faces: they were afraid. We wanted to get to the plane, but people pushed ahead. No one checked passports. The airplane took off, and we couldn't catch it.

I contacted my friend Wanda, and the Ukrainian government communicated with the Turkish government to insure that there will be another plane. But at the airport they told us, "There are no more flights. The only flight is for Americans." The children were so tired. At around 5 A.M., the Turkish government picked us up and took us to the military part of the airport. We saw all these officials—almost all of our government was there! Three hours we waited for the plane, and then another three hours inside the plane. There was a crowd outside that wouldn't let the plane take off, a thousand people. The airport was totally open, because everyone who worked there had left. At the civilian part of the airport, people swarmed the planes' wings, the wheels, the road. It is a famous photograph now.

They are normal people. The American Army finally pushed them out with this big machine—the machine they use in war, an armed vehicle. They just pushed the people out. The day after we departed, three or four people were killed; those people just wanted to get on the airplane, too.

That moment of my leaving, I was in tears. I love Afghanistan. Next to me in the plane my brother was very sick. He was shaking, with a panic attack. I was holding him. I saw our city get far, far, and more far away.

—Sahraa Karimi, as told to Adam Iscoe

"If anyone asks, I'm sun-dried."

• •

MISSISSIPPI POSTCARD
PYRAMID SCHEME

Scholars generally suppose that the ancient Egyptians built pyramids, those mysterious monuments of prodigious toil, with the help of earthen ramps buttressed by mud bricks. Pyramid stones are heavy, after all: two and a half tons apiece, on average. A nice draggable slope could explain how, if not exactly why, people stacked millions of them toward the sky, without cranes or internal combustion. Count Elon Musk among the skeptics ("Aliens built the pyramids obv.," he tweeted last year), along with Roger Larsen, a former newspaper editor in Columbus, Mississippi. Though not a conspiracy theorist, Larsen likes to say that, given a choice between an explanation of ramps or aliens, "I'd have to go with aliens," noting that an eight-per-cent incline leading to the top of the Great Pyramid of Giza would need to be more than a mile long, its volume possibly exceeding that of the pyramid itself. And where, then, did all the debris go after demolition?

Like many amateur Egyptologists, Larsen, who was a woodworker before founding Mississippi's best-selling weekly, the Columbus *Packet*, has his own construction theories, nurtured over hundreds, if not thousands, of hours of reading and tinkering, and he has gone so far as to fashion a homemade device that he thinks could have done the job, by enabling lifting rather than dragging. It resembles a mashup of a giant wooden rowing machine and a catapult, and uses technology that he believes is depicted on the walls at Abydos—notched Djed pillars and knots of Isis, for managing stretch in the many fathoms of required rope. It sits in Lowndes County, atop a cliff of so-called Selma chalk, or soft limestone, belonging to Larsen's friend Leon.

On a recent Saturday, Larsen attempted a demonstration of his contraption's worthiness. A block of concrete topped with slabs of marble, weighing around forty-five hundred pounds, served as his stone. The slope of Leon's cliff is forty-eight degrees, just shy of the Great Pyramid's fifty-two: close enough.

Larsen, by his own account, has the frame of a parakeet and toothpicks for arms, though he is prone to making bold claims, such as "If society collapses and we're back in the Stone Ages, I'ma be king of the heap" and "I think nothing like this has been tried since antiquity." For muscle, he conscripted friends of friends for fifty bucks apiece. He assigned four men to each of two tree-trunk oars, or levers, which he'd cut from the surrounding woods back in February. They

had slotted ends, for ropes. The men stood on staircases flanking a central frame, first walking the levers up and then grunting and pushing them back down, while two others attended to skis carrying the block up a kind of railroad track, made of poplar, on the chalk face. With each cycling of the levers, the block climbed about a foot and a half, amid jackhammer-like groaning from the ropes. Occasionally, Larsen poked at a knot with a crowbar—his version of a "was scepter," which he believes the Egyptians used to maintain tension. "It's a little tedious, isn't it?" he said at one point, addressing a small audience watching on FaceTime. ("Hello, New York!" one oarsman shouted.)

After nearly two hours, with the late-morning sun acquiring a Nile-side potency, Larsen's block reached the top of the cliff. It had veered slightly off its track and rested precariously on the lip. "Y'all come over here and hold this thing," Larsen said, calling the men off the staircases and inviting them to grab the central rope in a tug-of-war stance. "O.K. Bring it up!" The block didn't budge: more grist for the argument against dragging. Back to the levers they went to finish the job safely.

The laborers celebrated with fist bumps and Newports, perhaps the first humans in more than four thousand years to have raised such a heavy object using plausibly ancient technology, but their supervisor, ever wary of being dismissed as a Gyro Gearloose, couldn't mask a Sisyphean resignation that the academic establishment still wouldn't be impressed. Larsen had spent years trying to interest Old Kingdom experts in video footage of previous demonstrations, with limited success.

"I've been giving him some encouragement in this not because I think he's necessarily right but because I think he *might* be right," James Harrell, an archeological geologist with the University of Toledo, e-mailed. "Some of the ideas I've seen are pretty loopy, such as using large kites to carry the blocks up the sides of the pyramids, building water channels with locks to float the blocks up on rafts, or that the blocks are actually made of concrete that was cast in place. Roger's idea is not like these. It's sensible and well within the technological capabilities of the ancient Egyptians."

"I just thought it was something worthwhile, that's all," Larsen said. "I've got lots of other projects to get started on."

—*Ben McGrath*

BEST-LAID PLANS
BILL CUNNINGHAM'S WISH

Tom Gold first encountered Bill Cunningham, the *Times'* society photographer, three decades ago, when Gold was a nineteen-year-old dancer for New York City Ballet. "I was at a party and started a conga line, and there was this old man following me around taking pictures," Gold recalled recently, as he walked among the fountains at the Untermyer Gardens, in Yonkers. "After a while he said to me, 'You got it, kid. You know how to have fun!'" After that, Gold, who formed a dance company in 2008, appeared regularly in Cunningham's column—sometimes with the designer Mary McFadden or the night-club owner Nell Campbell. Gold went on, "Once, at the Frick, Bill called me over and said, 'Child, just because you know how to have fun doesn't mean you're not serious. I told that to Balanchine, too. Remember that always.'"

Gold, who is fifty-two, wore a bucket hat, a striped Breton jersey, and black patent-leather Danskos. He walked into the Indo-Persian Walled Garden, which is a surviving portion of Samuel Untermyer's hundred-and-fifty-acre Gilded Age estate, Greystone. Under an arm, Gold had tucked a cardboard envelope stuffed with sixteen photographs that Cunningham had taken at the park in 2013 and mailed to him. "He told me, 'Child, I have a project for you. You need to perform at the Untermyer Gardens. It's the most beautiful place,'" Gold said. Isadora Duncan performed there in the twenties and thirties.

In the garden, Gold opened the envelope. On each photo, Cunningham had scrawled notes detailing how a performance might be staged. One, of a mosaic-floored plaza flanked by sphinx-topped columns, read, "Looking from the amphitheater toward entrance. . . . Dance floor could be enlarged on lawn." The mosaic, based on an ancient fresco, shows lotus blossoms among spiral shapes. Another: "The dance floor is center between the columns & sphinxes." Cunningham noted that the amphitheatre would hold about "200 people plus standing" and pointed out that the park provided seat cushions so that guests wouldn't be sitting on stone. On a shot of the Temple of the Sky—a roofless circle of Corinthian columns topped with a palmette-and-anthemion design—he had written, "Great for after-dance reception."

Looking at the photos, Gold said, "I thought, Great, let's make this happen." He began petitioning Stephen Byrns, the Untermyer Gardens Conservancy's president. Byrns stalled. When Gold would run into Cunningham at an event or at his usual stalking ground, in front of Bergdorf Goodman, Cunningham always asked about the Untermyer idea. "The last time I saw him was in 2016, at an event at the Fashion Institute of Technology, and he asked again, but this time he was more intense and seemed agitated that it wasn't happening," Gold said. "He kept saying, 'You have to make this happen!'"

Cunningham died shortly after that, and Gold dropped his Untermyer pursuit. Unbeknownst to Gold, though, Cunningham had lobbied Byrns as well. This spring, seeking to augment the Untermyer's outdoor performances, Byrns reached out ("A lot of water under the bridge in the last 5 years," he wrote in an e-mail) and invited Gold to mount a program this summer. "I didn't hesitate," Gold said. "I ran to my storage space to see if I still had these pictures."

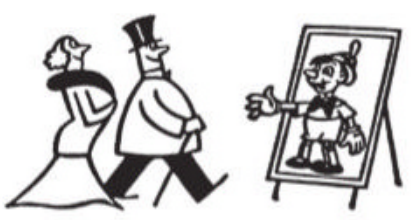
Gold approached the stage area to demonstrate a few of the show's moves. After a couple of pirouettes, he said, "In constructing the program, I was trying to think from Bill's perspective—what he would have liked to see, what he would have liked to photograph."

A few weeks later, he returned for the performance. About two hundred people had bought tickets. The gardens are public, and ten minutes before curtain a large wedding party barged past the "CLOSED FOR A TICKETED EVENT" signs to pose for photographs. "I was nervous that they were tracking mud and dirt onto the stage and the dancers would slip," Gold said. "I told them, 'We're about to do a show.' And they said, 'We have a fuck-

ing permit.'" Once the bride and groom left, Byrns introduced the program, and talked about Cunningham: "When they were arranging for him to come here, his assistant asked, Where was Yonkers, exactly? 'And do you think Mr. Cunningham could ride his bike up there?' He was about eighty at the time." After the show, there was a reception at a red-sauce Italian place in a Yonkers mini-mall. Cunningham's suggested party venue, the Temple of the Sky, was closed for renovations. It will be unveiled in October, at a gala honoring Martha Stewart, an event that would have been just another day at the office for Bill Cunningham.

—*Rima Suqi*

BRAVE NEW WORLD DEPT.
BEAM ME UP



Now that the Delta variant has scuttled the world's reopening plans, social distancing could be around for a long time. But that's only if you take a corporeal point of view. Last year, as a birthday present for Kim Kardashian, Kanye West commissioned a hologram of her dead father. In April, Sean (Diddy) Combs beamed his holographic self from Miami to Los Angeles for his son's birthday party. "Man marries hologram he admired for 10 years," the *Evening Standard* reported. Will the pandemic free us from our physical shackles?

The other day, David Nussbaum, a hologram entrepreneur, arrived at an office near Chelsea Market to demonstrate a large glowing box that looks like a vending machine and quietly hums. It was the grand opening of the New York headquarters of PORTL, his telepresence company. His big boxes have been popping up around the world lately—at Cannes, where they displayed N.F.T. art; at a Shanghai watch fair, where a Swiss watchmaker took meetings with clients at twice his normal size.

Nussbaum wore black glasses, a blazer, and Converse sneakers, as he had a few days earlier for a panel at Christie's. Unlike Princess Leia's message for Obi-Wan Kenobi, PORTL's holograms aren't technically three-dimensional, but they do look startlingly realistic, staring out of a six-and-a-half-foot-tall touch screen within an aluminum frame. ("You're right, it's not really a hologram, Mr. Wizard," Nussbaum tells nitpickers. "It's a digital likeness.")

Half of the participants on the Christie's panel were there not in person but as luminescent digital likenesses. Nussbaum had flown from Los Angeles, where he lives with his children and his wife, Charla, who was eight and a half months pregnant. "It took seven hours to get from L.A. to New York, turbulence the entire time," he said. "Why am I not just beaming there?"

PORTL sells its big machine and associated high-tech software and services for as much as a hundred thousand dollars. There are plans for a desktop version that would cost closer to two or three thousand. Customers include medical schools, such as the one at the University of Central Florida, where students will examine holograms to identify symptoms of Parkinson's disease, and to practice their bedside manners. Other buyers: rap moguls. The machines have microphones and cameras embedded in them, like giant smartphones, so, when Combs attended his son's birthday party, he could interact with the guests. An attempt to sing "Happy Birthday" along with the crowd was thwarted by a slight delay, a kink Nussbaum is working out.

Nussbaum used to host an interview podcast (Henry Winkler, Jenny Slate) in his living room. But after a computer-generated Tupac walked the stage at Coachella, in 2012, he switched careers. He found himself running an early hologram company that resurrected Billie Holiday, Jackie Wilson, and Whitney Houston. Soon he started projecting the living, as well. In 2014, he beamed Julian Assange through a satellite truck parked outside the Ecuadorian Embassy in London to Nantucket for a TED talk-style event. Holo-Assange took questions from the audience.

Those early projections required total darkness, which is a tough sell. Nussbaum worked on new machines in his living room and, in 2019, he founded PORTL. When the pandemic hit, the company took off. "I should have started it a year earlier," he said. "Maybe I'd be Zoom right now."

He walked over to a machine and started it up using an app on a tablet. A shoulder, and then a backside (belonging to a PORTL employee in L.A.) appeared in 4K volumetric resolution. "It's like hologram FaceTime," Nussbaum said. The employee stepped away and Charla, Nussbaum's wife, materialized in a leopard-print dress, beside their daughters, in pigtails. Charla waved.

"High five?" Nussbaum asked her.

Charla hesitantly raised her hand. "I don't like this bit," she said.

"A kiss?"

"I'd rather give you one in real life," she said. The girls offered sheepish thumbs up. Nussbaum stroked the illusion of one daughter's hair. "This is like the time I dressed up as Santa Claus and they didn't know it was me," he said. He ran his hand around his wife's swollen belly. "And this little guy in here, I can't say his name or I'll get in trouble."

The family had never communicated by PORTL before, but Charla was unfazed. "I'm happy that he's in New York doing it now, instead of in the living room," she said. They signed off to go swimming. Nussbaum launched a montage of recorded holograms from the tablet and said he plans to add a chatbot feature. "I have a hologram of me," he explained, as Spider-Man appeared on the screen. "My children's great-grandchildren will be able to sit opposite my hologram and ask any question, like hologram Alexa," he said. Spider-Man pressed his hands against an imaginary screen, like a mime trying to escape.

—*Neima Jahromi*

AMERICAN CHRONICLES

THE BIG HOUSE

Life after white-collar crime.

BY EVAN OSNOS

In the nineties, Jeffrey D. Grant had a law firm in Westchester County, a seat on the local school board, and an ownership stake in a bistro called, if you'll forgive the irony, the Good Life. He was in his early forties, garrulous and rotund, and he gloried in his capacity to consume. Each year, he took his wife and daughters on half a dozen "shopping vacations," though they sometimes neglected to open the bags between trips.

Grant had developed an early appreciation for personal displays of wealth and power. Born in 1956, the son of a marketing executive, he grew up on Long Island, graduated from SUNY Brockport, and worked his way through New York Law School as a shoe salesman. By then, his parents had divorced, and his father had moved in with Lynda Dick, a wealthy widow whose properties included one of the most storied mansions in Greenwich, Connecticut, a hilltop estate known as Dunnellen Hall. (It later became famous as the home of Leona Helmsley, the hotel magnate convicted of tax evasion in 1989, after a trial in which a housekeeper testified that Helmsley had told her, "We don't pay taxes. Only the little people pay taxes.")

Grant cultivated an ability to muscle his way into one opportunity after another. In law school, he approached the box office of a concert venue in Boston and, pretending to be the son of a music promoter, threatened revenge if he and three friends were not admitted free of charge. The brazen charade worked so well that the headliner, the rock-and-roll pioneer Gary U.S. Bonds, hosted the group backstage and, at the concert, sang "Happy Birthday" to one of Grant's friends. As a lawyer, Grant specialized in real estate and corporate work and regarded himself as an "assassin." In business and out of it, his philosophy was "Win, win, win."

As he reached his mid-forties, however, Grant found himself unravelling. He had become addicted to painkillers—first Demerol, prescribed for a torn Achilles tendon, and then OxyContin. He was increasingly erratic and grandiose, betting wildly on dot-com stocks. In 2000, as his debts mounted, he started filching money from clients' escrow accounts. The following year, after the terrorist attacks of September 11th, Grant applied for a disaster-relief loan from the Small Business Administration, claiming to have lost the use of an office near Ground Zero. That was a fiction. He received two hundred and forty-seven thousand dollars, which he used to cover personal and office expenses.

In July, 2002, under investigation for breaching his clients' accounts, he surrendered his law license and was later disbarred. That summer, as he sat in a Ralph Lauren wicker chair in his greenhouse in Rye, he attempted suicide, swallowing forty tablets of Demerol. He survived, and entered drug and alcohol rehab. He and his wife moved to Greenwich, seeking a fresh start, but the marriage was too badly frayed to survive.

Grant's undoing was not yet complete: officers of the Internal Revenue Service discovered the false claim on his loan application, and in 2004 a warrant was issued for his arrest. He pleaded guilty to wire fraud and money laundering, and a judge sentenced him to eighteen months in prison, chastising him for exploiting a national tragedy. On Easter Sunday, 2006, two friends drove Grant three hours west from Greenwich to Allenwood Low, a federal prison in the mountainous Amish country of central Pennsylvania. Grant quickly learned the rules: never take someone's seat in the TV room or ask a stranger what landed him in prison. And he mastered

A support group launched in Greenwich serves "guys detoxing from power."

ILLUSTRATION BY CHRISTIAN NORTHEAST

the black-market economy that runs on "macks," or foil packages of smoked mackerel, which sell for about a dollar in the commissary. He marked time mostly by walking—circling an outdoor track three or four hours a day, listening to NPR on headphones. "In the morning, all the airplanes from the East Coast would fly over going west, and at night they would come the other way," he told me. "I would remember myself as a businessman."

Grant was released to a halfway house in June, 2007, after fourteen months in prison. He had walked thirty-five hundred miles around the track and shed sixty-five pounds. He returned to Greenwich with no idea of what to do next.

Many people who have served time for white-collar felonies look to get back into business. Barely six months after the home-wares mogul Martha Stewart emerged from prison—she had been convicted of lying to investigators about a stock trade—she was hosting two new television shows. Grant, who no longer had a law license, tried applying himself to good works instead. He volunteered at rehab facilities that had helped him get sober. He joined the board of Family ReEntry, a nonprofit in Bridgeport, which aids formerly imprisoned people and their families, and he later served as its executive director. Hoping to improve his inner life, he studied for a divinity degree at Union Theological Seminary, in Manhattan. In 2009, he married Lynn Springer, a Greenwich event planner he had met in recovery. In 2012, they founded the Progressive Prison Project, a ministry focussed on white-collar and other nonviolent offenders.

As word of his experience spread, Grant started hearing from neighbors who were heading to prison or had recently returned and were seeking advice or companionship. At the time, a sense of alarm was animating conversations among businessmen along the Metro-North corridor: Preet Bharara, the U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of New York, had imposed a crackdown on insider trading, leading to more than eighty guilty pleas and convictions. Some of these cases were later invalidated by an appeals court, but Operation Perfect Hedge, as it was known, had punctured the realm of traders, analysts, and portfolio managers. "My phone would ring in the middle of the night," Grant said. One financier, under indictment, called while hiding in his office with the lights out. "He said, 'I'm afraid that people will recognize me on the street,'" Grant recalled. A reporter from *Absolute Return*, a trade publication for the hedge-fund industry, asked Grant, "How do Wall Street skills usually translate in prison?" His reply: "These skills are not only in large degree useless, they are probably counterproductive." As he told me recently, "Business rewards a certain type of attitude and assertiveness—all things that will get you killed in prison."

Grant, in his pastoral role for anxious brokers, fallen hedgies, and other wobbling pillars of late capitalism, came to expect fresh inquiries from desperate people each morning when he opened his e-mail. "Everyone going through this is freaking out, so they're up all night, Googling," he said. In the hope of nourishing his unlikely flock, Grant developed an ambitious reading list, which included "Letters and Papers from Prison," by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and "The Gulag Archipelago," by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. If some callers found that Bonhoeffer's words of resistance to the victims of national socialism did not seem immediately applicable, Grant also offered practical tips. Before reporting to prison, he advised them, mail yourself the phone numbers of family members and friends on the visitors' list, because "you'll be too discombobulated to remember them once you're inside." And remind your wife never to touch paper money on the morning of a visit; almost every bill bears traces of drug residue, which will set off the scanners.

In 2016, Grant established what he called the White Collar Support Group, an online meeting inspired by twelve-step programs for drug and alcohol addiction. He described the program as a step toward "ethics rehab" and, on his Web site, explained that it was for people who wanted to "take responsibility for our actions and the wreckage we caused." In blunter terms, he told me that it was for "guys detoxing from power and influence."

The first session attracted four attendees, including a hedge-fund manager and a man who had pilfered from his child's youth-soccer club. But soon the program grew. In the next five years, more than three hundred people cycled through, either on their way to prison or just out and trying to reëstablish a semblance of their old order. Some of Grant's flock were familiar from front-page scandals, born of Ponzi schemes, insider trading, and other forms of expensive corruption; others were virtually unknown to the public. This summer, I asked him if I could sit in on a meeting of the White Collar Support Group. He agreed, but alerted his members in advance, in case anyone wanted to preserve his privacy.

At seven o'clock one evening in July, I signed on to Zoom and found myself with twenty-eight people, mostly male and white, each identified by a name and a location. Meetings are free, though Grant suggests a donation of five dollars to his ministry. He draws a distinction between his work and the industry of white-collar "prison coaches" who offer bespoke services for a price. Among them, Wall Street Prison Consultants promises to "ensure you serve the shortest sentence possible in the most favorable institution." It sells consulting packages at the levels of Bronze, Silver, and Gold, the finest of which includes "Polygraph Manipulation Techniques," "Prison Survival Orientation Coaching," and an "Early Release Package" that helps clients apply for a drug-treatment program to reduce the length of a sentence.

Grant, who now lives in Woodbury, Connecticut, appeared on camera wearing a pale-blue oxford shirt and sitting before a stone fireplace. As he called the meeting to order, we recited Reinhold Niebuhr's Serenity Prayer, and then Grant reminded everyone of the rules: with few exceptions, anyone who talked for more than three minutes would hear a snippet of music—on this occasion, the Parliament funk classic "Mothership Connection (Star Child)"—signalling him to wrap it up. Surrendering control, Grant likes to tell his charges, may not come naturally.

Before the meeting, Grant had warned me not to expect universal contrition. "Almost everyone who contacts us has been successful, controlling, and perhaps narcissistic," he said. "The elements that made them successful are also the elements that contributed to

their demise." Throughout their pre-indictment careers, aggression and rule-bending were considered strengths. In American culture, white-collar crime is often portrayed less as evidence of unfettered greed than as a misguided sibling of success.

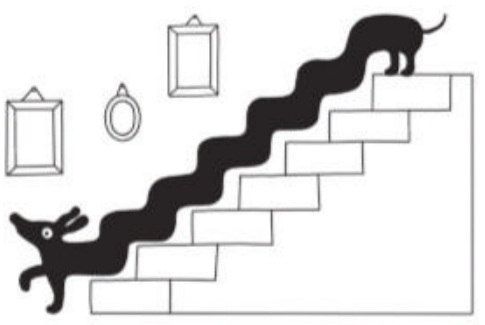
By and large, the country's governing class has encouraged that view. After the stock market crashed in 1929, Congress faced public pressure to curb the backroom manipulation that had helped devastate millions of shareholders. But Richard Whitney, the president of the New York Stock Exchange, a graduate of Groton and Harvard, told senators in Washington, "You gentlemen are making a great mistake. The exchange is a perfect institution." In 1938, Whitney was caught embezzling from the New York Yacht Club, his father-in-law, and a number of others. He went to Sing Sing dressed in a double-breasted suit.

Not long after Whitney's fall, the sociologist Edwin Sutherland devised the term "white-collar crime," to describe wrongdoing committed "by a person of respectability and high social status in the course of his occupation." Since then, each cycle of boom and bust has delivered new iterations of rapacious self-dealing, often indelibly linked to time or place, like schools of painting—the naked fraud of a Savings & Loan, the whimsical math of an Arthur Andersen. In 2001, following the accounting scandals at Enron and other companies, a publication called *CFO Magazine* quietly abandoned its annual Excellence Awards, because winners from each of the previous three years had gone to prison.

Since the turn of the millennium, the prosecution of white-collar crime has plummeted—but this should not imply a surge in moralism among our leading capitalists. After the attacks of September 11th, the F.B.I. began to shift resources toward counterterrorism. Meanwhile, Republican lawmakers cut the budget of the Internal Revenue Service so sharply that it had the same number of special agents in 2017 as it had half a century earlier, even though the national population has grown by two-thirds.

The effects of impunity have become more blatant since the Great Recession of 2007-09, when, infamously, almost no top executives went to prison—despite the loss of more than nineteen trillion dollars in household wealth. At the time, leaders at the Department of Justice claimed that they could not prove fraudulent intent by Wall Street titans, who were many layers removed from the daily handling of toxic securities. Jed Rakoff, a judge in the Southern District of New York, believes that this was a catastrophic misreading of the law. Executives, he argues, could have been prosecuted under the principle that they were "willfully blind" to patterns of abuse that enriched them. "Dozens of people defrauded millions of people out of probably billions of dollars," Rakoff told me. The imperatives had less to do with compensating victims than with deterring crimes not yet conceived. "There are studies that are more than a hundred years old that show that the best way to deter any crime is to catch the perpetrators quickly," he said.

In the years since, the failure to hold top executives accountable has become intertwined with historic levels of income inequality, a phenomenon that Jennifer Taub, a professor at Western New England University School of Law, calls "criminogenic." In her 2020 book, "Big Dirty Money," she wrote, "In our society, extreme wealth often confers tremendous power. So just as power tends to corrupt, so does excessive wealth." But nothing expressed America's ambivalence toward white-collar crime more eloquently than the election of Donald J.



Trump, whose life and career as a business fabulist merited no fewer than a hundred and twenty-five mentions in "Big Dirty Money." Under his leadership, federal prosecutions of white-collar crime reached an all-time low. In 2020, Trump delivered pardons and clemency to a slew of affluent felons, including Michael Milken, the junk-bond trader who had pleaded guilty to securities violations three decades earlier. Taub noted that the official White House announcement about the pardoned businessmen used the word "successful" to describe them four times.

Measurements of success, or something like it, haunt the conversations in the White Collar Support Group. In the Zoom meeting, one of the first people to speak up was Andy Tezna, a thirty-six-year-old former executive at NASA, who had been sentenced the previous week for fraud. Applying for COVID relief in the name of fictitious businesses, Tezna had collected more than three hundred and fifty thousand dollars, including loans issued under the Paycheck Protection Program. He used the money to finance a Disney Vacation Club timeshare, a swimming pool ($48,962), and, to ease the social isolation of the pandemic, a French bulldog ($6,450).

"I got eighteen months," Tezna told the group, glumly. "Definitely not the number I had in mind." He was sitting beside a window covered by venetian blinds; he wore white earbuds and several days' growth of beard. He was waiting for word on when to report to prison. In court, Tezna and his lawyer had presented him as an American success story gone wrong. His family had come from Colombia when he was thirteen and lived in an unfinished basement, while he helped his mother clean houses. Later, he earned a degree from George Mason University and landed a job at NASA, which paid him a hundred and eighty-one thousand dollars a year. In the job, he attended a space launch with members of Trump's Cabinet and Elon Musk. "I just thought, My life is great," he told the group.

To the judge, Tezna had framed his malfeasance narrowly, arguing, "I was bad at managing my finances." The Justice Department thought it was worse than that. "These are not one-off mistakes," a prosecutor told the court. "This was greed."

A voice on the call piped up: "Hey, Andy? It's Bill Baroni."

It took me a moment to place the name. Then I remembered Bridgegate. In 2013, after the New Jersey governor Chris Christie appointed Baroni as the deputy executive director of the Port Authority, he was accused of helping to arrange a traffic jam on the George Washington Bridge, in order to punish the

mayor of Fort Lee, who had refused to endorse Christie for reëlection. Baroni was convicted of fraud and served three months in prison. But he denied the charges, and eventually the Supreme Court overturned his conviction. Justice Elena Kagan wrote that, even though the evidence showed "deception, corruption, abuse of power," the Bridgegate episode did not meet the legal threshold of fraud. Baroni's victory in the Supreme Court gave him unique status in the group. "I got the exact same sentence you did—eighteen months," he told Tezna. "I know what's in your head today."

For the next ninety minutes, the mood veered between grave and celebratory. Members swapped tidbits about mutual friends ("He got moved out of the private prison in Mississippi") and applauded new ventures ("I signed a lease last week"). Grant has developed a soothing vocabulary—about strength regained and community embraced—which collided occasionally with members' laments. "As a single guy, I can tell you dating sucks," a man in Delaware said, "because the reactions from women run the gamut from 'Oh, my God, you're the worst form of life on earth' to 'Oh, that's cool! Women like bad boys.'" A former hedge-fund manager in Chicago was still smarting over the publicity around his indictment. "Reporters were calling my parents and my brother," he said. "I don't even know how they got their phone numbers." Members of the group arrive in disparate circumstances: some have managed to keep significant assets, while others are tapped out after restitution and legal expenses. According to Grant, the biggest distinction is between those who have been to prison and those who have not. Those who haven't served time, he told me, are "sort of outside the club."

More than a few members attributed their crimes to a kind of consumerist inadequacy. Craig Stanland, who defrauded the networking company Cisco of equipment worth more than eight hundred thousand dollars, told the group, "It was just pure shame from the beginning—not being able to tell my wife that I couldn't afford that life style, all the way through getting arrested. And then the scarlet letter." But Bill Livolsi, speaking from the Tulsa suburbs, who went to prison for his role in a Ponzi scheme that passed itself off as a hedge fund, had come to see his new circumstances as an unburdening. "I finally got a job after a year of being out. It makes a whopping fifteen dollars an hour, but I've never been happier with a job," he said. "My focus isn't on what flight I'm taking or where I'm going on this particular vacation. It's on how my family's doing and how I'm doing."

"It was more gratifying when our neighbors were home all day to hear me play."

• •

Grant is solicitous. He asks new members to introduce themselves and, when needed, draws them out. Richard Bronson, a former Lehman Brothers stockbroker with cropped gray hair and a beard, said, "I used to work on Wall Street. I did very well." In fact, Bronson became a partner at Stratton Oakmont, the firm made infamous by Martin Scorsese's "The Wolf of Wall Street." He moved to Florida and converted a small trading house called Biltmore Securities into a firm with five hundred employees. In Miami, he joined the boards of the ballet and the museum of contemporary art, opened a night club and started a magazine, and held court at an oceanside villa. But prosecutors said that all this was built on deceit; they accused him of running a boiler room that fed investors a stream of bogus stocks, causing losses estimated at ninety-six million dollars. Bronson disputed this figure, and insisted that he had repaid his clients. Nevertheless, he pleaded guilty to securities and wire fraud in 2002, and served twenty-two months in prison.

Bronson told the group, "This is really the first time I've ever been around people who have similar comeuppances." He has been trying to revive his business career, launching 70 Million Jobs, a post-prison employment service, and an app called Commissary Club ("the exclusive social network for people with criminal histories"). "I've been out of prison for sixteen years, and I committed my crimes more than twenty-five years ago, and yet I wake up every morning with this gaping hole in my heart, out of regret for the things that I did." He choked up momentarily and paused to collect himself. "I don't suspect that I'll get over this feeling," he said, "and that saddens me."

Others tried to buck him up. "I think we're going to have to have a meeting about self-care soon," Grant said.

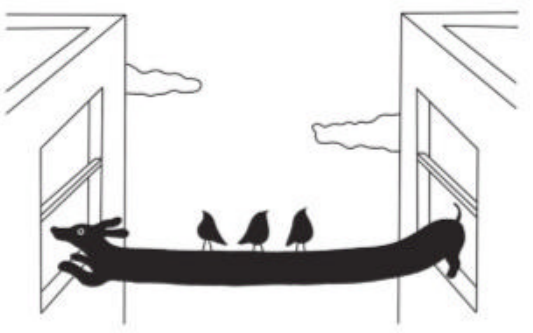
Behind each new revelation of white-collar crime lurks an uncomfortable question about some of America's most lucrative businesses: Are they attracting rogues or grooming them? Eugene Soltes,

a professor at Harvard Business School, told me that regulations were partly to blame. "There is more white-collar crime today because there are more things that are criminal today than fifty years ago," he said. Bribing a foreign official, for instance, was legal until the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act of 1977, and insider trading was rarely prosecuted until the nineteen-eighties. Today, those are among the most common offenses. But, Soltes went on, "I suspect that you might be asking the more intuitive version of this question. Given the same laws, same number of people, et cetera, is the proclivity for someone to engage in white-collar crime higher than it was fifty years ago?"

For his book "Why They Do It," Soltes interviewed scores of people convicted or accused of white-collar crime. He said that he had found no evidence of a growing inclination to break laws. What has changed, though, is what he calls the "psychological distance" between perpetrators and their victims: "Business is done with individuals at greater length now, which reduces the feeling that managers are harming others." In thought experiments, people agree to sacrifice the life of someone they can't see far more readily than that of someone who stands before them. In Soltes's interviews with people who had committed price-fixing or fraud, he found that many of them had never had a personal encounter with the victims.

In recent years, the lament that moral constraints have weakened has been voiced not just by critics of Wall Street but also by practitioners. In 2012, John C. Bogle, an iconic investor who founded the Vanguard Group and spent more than six decades in finance, wrote, "When I came into this field, the standard seemed to be 'there are some things that one simply doesn't do.' Today, the standard is 'if everyone else is doing it, I can do it too.'" Soon afterward, the law firm Labaton Sucharow conducted a survey of finance professionals, in which a quarter of them said that they would "engage in insider trading to make $10 million if they could get away with it." Around the same time, Greg Smith, an executive director at Goldman Sachs, announced his resignation, decrying a "decline in the firm's moral fiber." Writing in the *Times*, he observed, "Over the last 12 months I have seen five different managing directors refer to their own clients as 'muppets.' . . . You don't have to be a rocket scientist to figure out that the junior analyst sitting quietly in the corner of the room hearing about 'muppets,' 'ripping eyeballs out' and 'getting paid' doesn't exactly turn into a model citizen."

Researchers have elucidated the way that dubious behavior moves through a



community. In the mid-aughts, the federal government brought criminal and civil cases for backdating stock options—manipulating records so that executives could take home a larger return than their options really delivered. Studies found that the practice had started in Silicon Valley and then infected the broader business world; the vectors of transmission could be traced to specific individuals who served as directors or auditors of multiple companies. An unethical habit spreads in encounters among neighbors and colleagues, through subtle cues that psychologists call "affective evaluations." If people are rising on one measurement (profit) even as they are falling on another (ethics), the verdict about which matters more will hinge on the culture around them—on which values are most "exalted by members of their insular business communities," Soltes observed in his book. As he told me, "If you spend time with people who pick locks, you will probably learn to pick locks."

In 2013, prosecutors announced an indictment of S.A.C. Capital Advisors—named for its founder, Steven A. Cohen—calling it a "veritable magnet for market cheaters." Cohen, like a considerable number of his peers, lived in Greenwich. In the previous decade, as the hedge-fund industry surged in scale and profits, the rise of the Internet had allowed funds to leave Wall Street, and many moved to southern Connecticut to take advantage of favorable tax rates and easy commutes. By 2005, hedge funds had taken over two-thirds of Greenwich's commercial real estate.

After the charges against Cohen were announced, David Rafferty, a columnist for Greenwich *Time*, a local paper, published a piece with the headline "GREENWICH, GATEWAY TO WHITE-COLLAR CRIME." He wrote, "A few years ago you might have been proud to tell your friends you lived in 'The Hedge Fund Capital of the World.' Now? Not so much."

Rafferty, in his column, described a "growing sense of unease in certain circles as one hedgie after another seems to be facing the music." Cohen, however, faced the music for a limited interlude. Under an agreement brokered with prosecutors, his firm pleaded guilty to insider trading and was sentenced to pay $1.8 billion in penalties. After a two-year suspension, Cohen returned to the hedge-fund business, and made enough money to buy the New York Mets. The price was $2.4 billion, the largest sum ever paid for a North American sports franchise.

Luigi Zingales, a finance professor at the University of Chicago, told me that he wishes his profession spoke more candidly about accountability and impunity. Most of the time, he said, business schools find "every possible way to avoid the moral questions." He added, "I don't know of any alum that has been kicked out of the alumni association for immoral behavior. There are trustees of business schools today who have been convicted of bribery and insider trading, and I don't think people notice or care." He went on, "People are getting more and more comfortable in the gray area."

One of the longest-running members of the White Collar Support Group is a lean and taciturn man in his forties named Tom Hardin—or, as he is known with some notoriety in Wall Street circles, Tipper X. Not long after graduating from business school at Wharton, Hardin went to work for a hedge fund in Greenwich. He had much to learn. Almost instantly, he began hearing that some competitors, such as the billionaire Raj Rajaratnam, were suspected of relying on illegal tips from company insiders. (Rajaratnam was later convicted and sentenced to eleven years.) In 2007, after Hardin became a partner at Lanexa Global Management, a hedge fund in

New York, he got his own inside tip, a heads-up on an upcoming acquisition, and he traded on the information and beat the market. He repeated similar stunts three times. "I'm, like, I would never get caught if I buy a small amount of stock," he told me. "This is like dropping a penny in the Grand Canyon." He went on, "You can say, 'I'm highly ethical and would never do this.' But once you're in the environment, and you feel like everybody else is doing it, and you feel you're not hurting anybody? It's very easy to convince yourself."

One morning in 2008, Hardin was walking out of the dry cleaner's when two F.B.I. agents approached him. They sat him down in a Wendy's nearby and told him that they knew about his illegal trades. He had a choice: go to jail or wear a wire. He chose the latter, and became one of the most productive informants in the history of securities fraud. The F.B.I. gave him a tiny recorder disguised as a cell-phone battery, which he slipped into his shirt pocket, to gather evidence in more than twenty criminal cases brought under Operation Perfect Hedge. For a year and a half, his identity was disguised in court documents as Tipper X, fuelling a mystery around what the *Times* called "the secret witness at the center of the biggest insider-trading case in a generation."

In December, 2009, Hardin pleaded guilty, and his identity was revealed in court filings. He had avoided prison but become a felon, which made features of a normal life all but impossible, from opening a brokerage account to coaching his daughters' soccer team. He was unsure how he could earn a living. "I would ask my attorney, 'Are there any past clients you can connect me with who've got to the other side of this and are back on their feet?' He was, like, 'Sorry, not really.'"

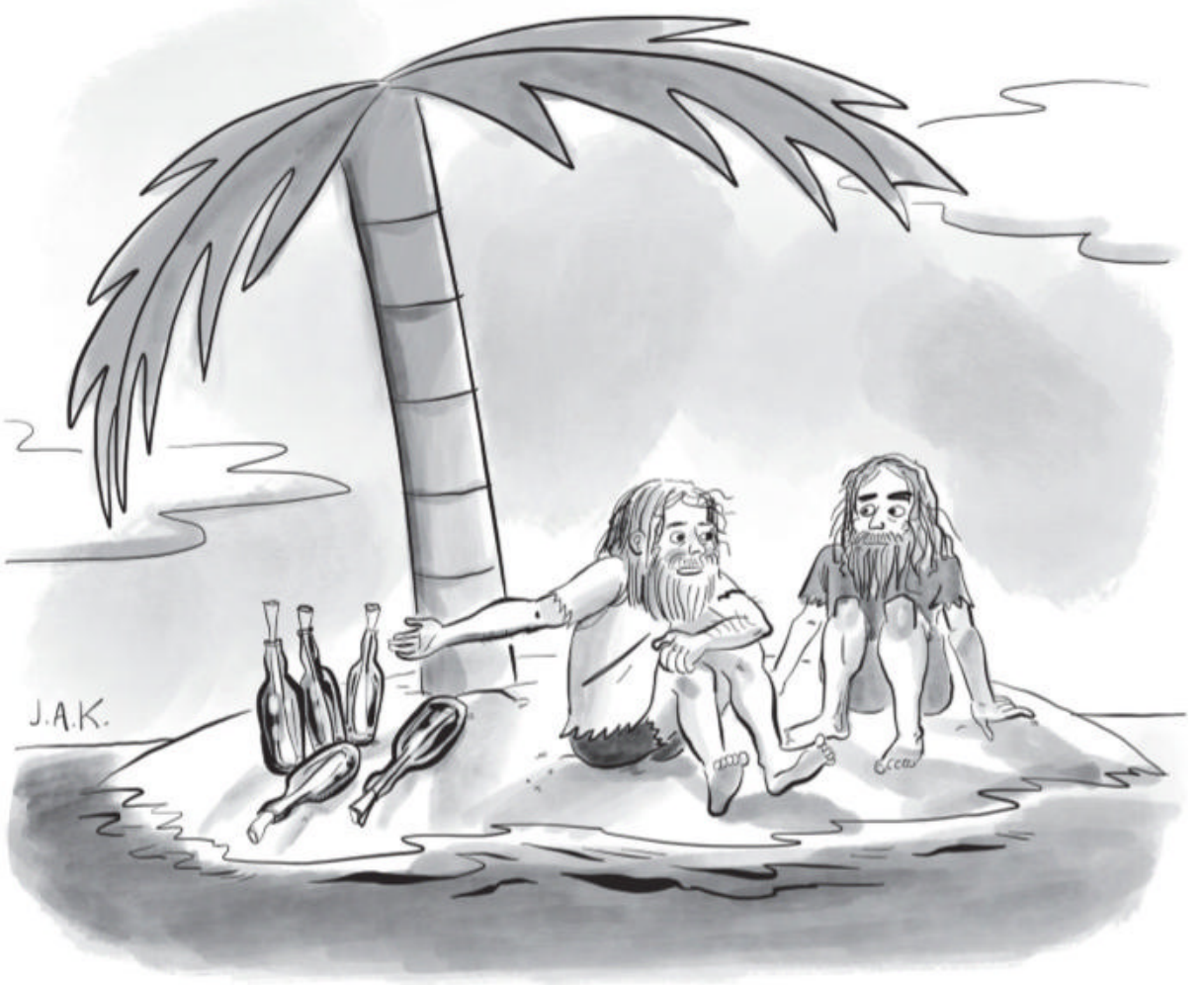
He heard of Grant's group through a friend. "I had no idea something like this existed," Hardin said. "Jeff was the first one who said, 'Hey, here's a group of people just in our situation. Come every Monday.'" In 2016, the F.B.I. called him again—this time, to invite him to brief a class of freshman federal agents. Hardin's lecture at the F.B.I. led to more speeches—first for free, and eventually for a living. He was back on Wall Street, as a teller of cautionary tales. It was not quite motivational speaking; his niche, as he put it, dryly, was "overcoming self-inflicted career decimation."

In his dealings with his peers, Hardin has learned to distinguish who is genuinely remorseful from who is not. "I'll hear from white-collar felons who tell me, 'I made a mistake,'" he told me. "I'll say, 'A mistake is something we do without intention. A bad *decision* was made intentionally.' If you're classifying your bad decisions as mistakes, you're not accepting responsibility."

In the era of rising discontent over injustice, some Americans accused of white-collar crimes have sought to identify with the movement to curb incarceration and prosecutorial misconduct. So far, the spirit of redemption has not extended to the members of the White Collar Support Group, whose crimes relate to some of the very abuses of power that inspire demands for greater accountability. For the moment, they are caught between competing furies, so they rely, more than ever, on one another. "A white-collar advocate still doesn't have a seat at the table of the larger criminal-justice conversation," Grant told me. "We exist because there's no place else for us to go."

The group members' predicament rests on an unavoidable hypocrisy: after conducting themselves with little concern for the public, they find themselves appealing to the public for mercy. Baroni, the former Port Authority executive, told me, "I can't go back. All I can do now is to take the experiences that I've had and try and help people." His regrets extend beyond his scandal. He had been a New Jersey state senator, and, he said, "I voted to increase mandatory minimum sentencing. I never would have done that had I had the experience of being in prison."

Baroni recently helped establish a nonprofit called the Prison Visitation Fund, which, if it can raise money, promises to pay travel expenses for family members who can't afford to travel. His partner, and first funder, in the endeavor is a former lawyer named Gordon Caplan, who is one of fifty-seven defendants in the college-admissions scandal known as Operation Varsity Blues. Caplan was a co-chairman of the law firm Willkie Farr & Gallagher until 2019, when he was indicted for paying seventy-five thousand dollars for a test proctor to fix his daughter's A.C.T. exam. "To be honest," Caplan said, on an F.B.I. recording at the time, "I'm not worried about the moral issue here." He pleaded guilty



"I keep meaning to read these."

and was sent to a federal prison camp in Loretto, Pennsylvania, a minimum-security facility that houses low-risk offenders with less than ten years left on their sentences.

Caplan was one of America's most prominent lawyers, but he never paid much attention to complaints about the criminal-justice system until he was in the maw of it. "What I saw is other people going through a system that's built for failure, built for recidivism," he told me recently. Caplan had presumed that incarcerated people had reasonable access to job training and reading materials. He was wrong. "The only courses that were offered were how to become a certified physical trainer and automotive repair." Inmates could create their own classes, and Caplan taught a short course on basic business literacy. "I had fifteen to twenty guys every class," he said. " 'Do I set up an L.L.C. versus a corporation?' 'Should I borrow money or should I get people to invest in equity?' " Since getting out, Caplan has been alarmed by the barriers that prevent even nonviolent felons from rebuilding a life. "I have assets and I have family and I've got all that. But how does a guy who came out for dealing marijuana even start a painting business?"

Hearing Caplan, Grant, and others talk about their sudden understanding of America's penal system put me in mind of the work of Bryan Stevenson, a leading civil-rights lawyer and the founder of the Equal Justice Initiative, which advocates for criminal-justice reform. He beseeches people to "get proximate"—to step outside the confines of their experience. Stevenson often quotes his grandmother, the daughter of enslaved people, who went on to raise nine children. "You can't understand most of the important things from a distance, Bryan," she told him. "You have to get close."

But getting close is not the same as staying close. After serving twenty-eight days in prison, Caplan returned to Greenwich, where he lives in a seven-million-dollar Colonial, down the hill from the old Helmsley estate. For all his recent concern about the failings of criminal justice, I suspected that the country might have more to learn from him about his own failings. What, I asked, possessed him to pay someone to falsify his kid's college-admissions test results? He was not eager to answer. "Achievement, I think, is like a drug," he said, after a pause. "Once you achieve one thing, you need to achieve the next thing. And, when you're surrounded by people that are doing that, it becomes self-reinforcing. When you also have insecurities, which a lot of highly motivated people do, you're more apt to do what is necessary to achieve. And it's easy to step off the line." Caplan convinced himself that paying to change his daughter's test results was scarcely more objectionable than other forms of influence and leverage that get kids into school. "I saw what I believed to be a very corrupt system, and I've got to play along or I'll be disadvantaged."

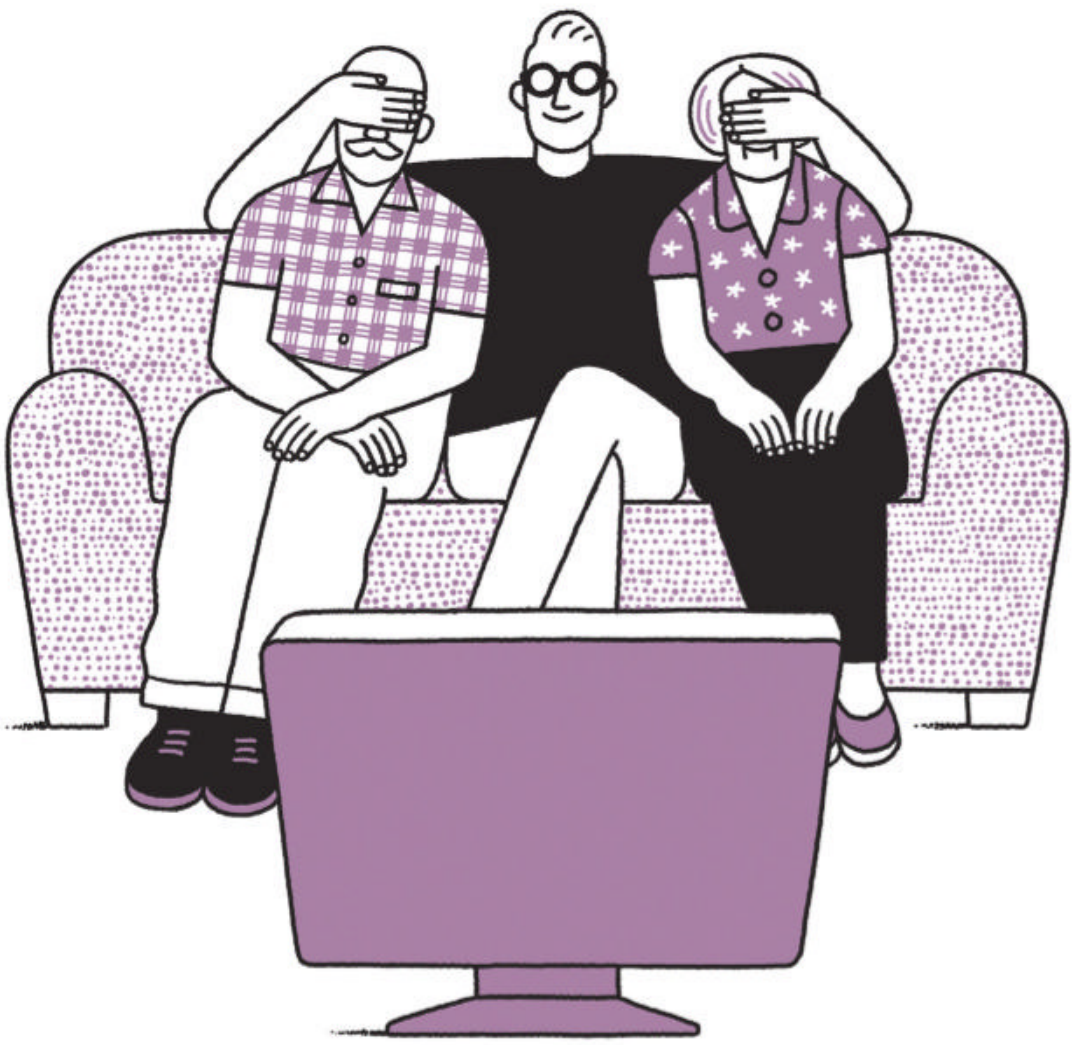
Greed, of course, is older than the Ten Commandments. But Caplan's experience illuminated the degree to which greed has been celebrated in America by the past two generations, engineered for lucrative new applications that, in efficiency and effect, are as different from their predecessors as an AR-15 rifle is from a musket. If you have the means, you can hone every edge, from your life expectancy to the amount of taxes you pay and your child's performance on the A.C.T.s. It's not hard to insure that the winners keep winning, as long as you don't get caught.

In the most candid moments on the Zoom call, people acknowledged the damage that their crimes had inflicted on their spouses and children. Seth Williams, a former district attorney of Philadelphia, pleaded guilty in 2017 to accepting gifts in exchange for favors, and served nearly three years in federal prison. Afterward, he struggled to find an apartment that would accept a felon. His first job was stocking shelves overnight at a big-box store; eventually, after an online course, he became a wedding officiant for hire. He was not surprised that former colleagues avoided him, but watching the effects on his family left him in despair. "It affects all of us in how our children are treated at their schools, on the playground," he said. "Some of our spouses, people want nothing to do with them."

Not long ago, Grant regained his law license in the State of New York, based largely on his work as a minister and as an expert on preparing for prison and life after. Nineteen years after being disbarred, he rented an office on West Forty-third Street in Manhattan and started practicing again, as a private general counsel and a specialist in "white-collar crisis management." At seminary, he had studied migrant communities, and he came to see an analogy to people convicted of white-collar crimes. "We have one foot in the old country, one foot in the new," he told me. If they hoped to thrive again, they would have to depend on one another. "Greek Americans funded each other and opened diners. They lift each other up." He went on, "The problem we have in the white-collar community is that people who have been prosecuted for white-collar crimes want to become so successful again that they are no longer associated with it. I've approached some of the household names, and to a one they've rejected it." I asked him if he was referring to people like Michael Milken and Martha Stewart. Grant demurred. "My mission is to help people relieve their shame, not to shame someone into doing something."

Grant will tell you that shame does not help in recovery. But America's record in recent years suggests that, in the nation at large, too little shame attaches to white-collar crime. If the country has begun to appreciate the structural reasons that many of its least advantaged people break the law, it has yet to reckon with the question of why many of its most advantaged do, too. Members of Grant's group usually come to accept that they got themselves into trouble, but more than a few hope to follow Milken and Stewart back to the club they used to belong to—winners of the American game.

As the Zoom meeting wound down, Grant asked Andy Tezna, the former NASA executive on his way to prison, if there was anything else he wanted to say. "I had a lapse of judgment," he began, then caught himself and confessed impatience with the language of confession. "I'm so tired of using that word, but, whatever it was that led me to make my mistake, it's not going to define me for the rest of my life." He thanked the members of the group for helping him get ready to embark on his "government-mandated retreat." He'd see them afterward, he said, "once I'm out, a little wiser, a little older, with a few more gray hairs." ♦



THE PARENT TRAP

BY NICKY GUERREIRO AND ETHAN SIMON

You love your retirement-age parents. You want what's best for them. But let me ask you this: Do you know where your parents are *right now*?

We live in a scary world, and today's parents require constant supervision. When it comes to the safety of your aging mom and dad, you can never be too vigilant. Your young brain is still developing, growing, and adapting, but your parents' brains are hard and rigid, like the Pepperidge Farm cake they've had in the freezer since the Bush years. Their impressionable, vulnerable minds are swimming in a confusing soup of class anxiety and "King of Queens" reruns. It's up to you to protect them from a dangerous world.

Parents have far more access to technology today than we did when we were kids. It starts out innocently enough, with them swiping their laptop screen like it's an iPad, or buying those online supplements that make Alex Jones even redder. But, pretty soon, they're purchasing surgical instruments online for "the collapse" and tweeting racial epithets at the Delta Airlines customer-service robot.

Are you monitoring your parents' media diet? When you were a kid, they probably restricted what you watched. Maybe you weren't allowed to stay up for "South Park," or play Dungeons and Dragons, on account of its roots in "demon summoning" and "gambling." Don't you owe them the same courtesy? As we speak, your parents could be watching "Fox and Friends." You think that's "Seinfeld" they're watching? Nope. That's "Gutfeld!," and his Soup Nazi has, at best, a casual interest in soup.

I don't want to alarm you, but your parents could even be trying to relate to today's pop culture. Right now, your mom could be holding up the grocery-store checkout line with a long, boring monologue about how much she loves "that Billy Eyelash—such a talented young man."

And when was the last time you checked their room for contraband? When you were a kid, they tore up your sock drawer looking for bongs made from Sprite cans, or for the colored rubber bands you supposedly used to send coded messages about premarital sex. Today, while you snooze peacefully on the pullout sofa, your parents could be getting turnt on Lipitor—which we can only assume is some kind of turbocharged meth. That VHS tape labelled "wedding video" that you found stashed under their mattress? It could be mid-eighties pornography. That stuff is so grainy it's hard to know exactly what you're looking at. That's why it's so dangerous.

I don't want to scare you, but your unsupervised parent could even be running for a seat in the U.S. Senate. I have a friend who went on a two-week vacation—when he came back, his dad had a campaign office, a super PAC sponsored by the Koch brothers, and ten thousand lawn signs that read "COMMERCIALS ARE TOO LOUD!" He won in a landslide, and is now a ranking member of the Judiciary Committee. Do you want to be the child watching helplessly on C-SPAN as your dad asks Mark Zuckerberg to help him reset his password? Didn't think so.

A parent with boundaries is a happy parent. Sure, they'll fight you at first. "This is ridiculous! I'm a grown man," Dad will say. Or: "I ran a successful Fortune 500 company," as if that's some kind of defense. Maybe they'll try to hit you with the old "I gave birth to you" line. No matter what they say, you have to stand firm. Remember, you're the kid, and they're the parents. It isn't up for debate.

When your aging parents act up, just think: When they were kids, there was lead in pretty much everything. Seriously, everything. Like, grilled cheeses and stuff. Next time they talk about their last trip north of Ninety-sixth Street as if it were D Day, show a little grace—just grit your teeth and bear it.

But buying a condo in Boca? Not even once. ♦

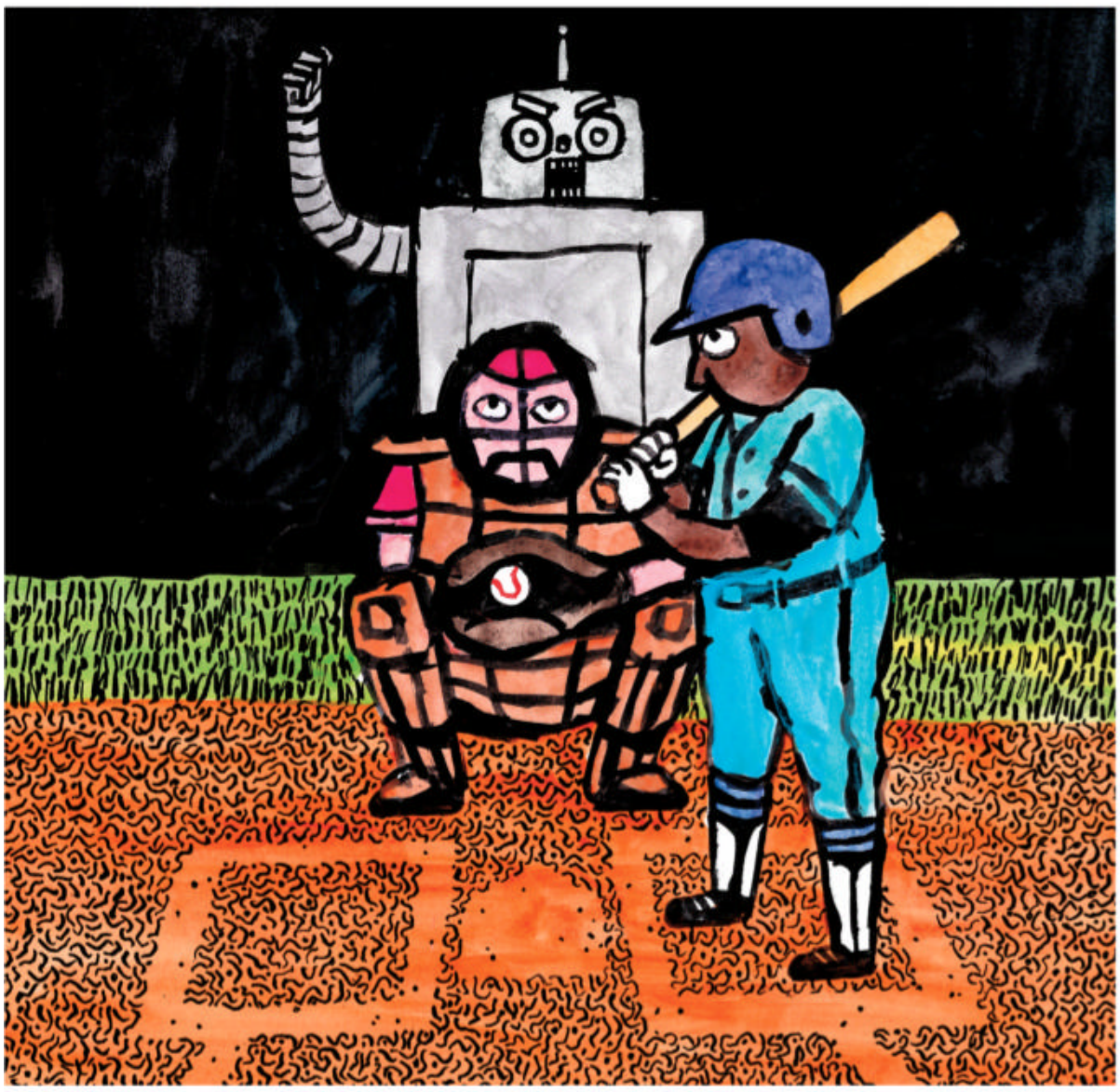
LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

THE SPORTING SCENE

KILL THE UMPIRE

Will robots save America's pastime?

BY ZACH HELFAND



Automation is accurate, but do we watch baseball to kill time or to maximize it?

Grown men wearing tights like to yell terrible things at Fred DeJesus. DeJesus is an umpire in the outer constellations of professional baseball, where he's been spat on and, once, challenged to a postgame fight in a parking lot. He was born in Bushwick, Brooklyn, to Puerto Rican parents, stands five feet three, and is shaped, in his chest protector, like a fire hydrant; he once ejected a player for saying that he suffered from "little-man syndrome." Two years ago, DeJesus became the first umpire in a regular-season game anywhere to use something called the Automated Ball-Strike System. Most players refer to it as the "robo-umpire." Major League Baseball had designed the system and was testing it in the Atlantic League, where DeJesus works. The term "robo-umpire" conjures a little R2-D2 positioned behind the plate, beeping for strikes and booping for balls. But, for aesthetic and practical reasons, M.L.B. wanted human umpires to announce the calls, as if playacting their former roles. So DeJesus had his calls fed to him through an earpiece, connected to a modified missile-tracking system. The contraption looked like a large black pizza box with one glowing green eye; it was mounted above the press box. When the first pitch came in, a recorded voice told DeJesus it was a strike. He announced it, and no one in the ballpark said anything.

The eeriest thing about the robo-umpire is the silence. This summer, I attended some games in Central Islip, New York, home of the Long Island Ducks, to check it out. The pizza-box device is made by a company called TrackMan, founded by two Danish brothers, Klaus and Morten Eldrup-Jørgensen, who created it to train golfers. It is easy to miss. At one of DeJesus's games, I observed a kind of Turing test. Starting in the fifth inning, a lanky middle-aged guy behind home plate started heckling. "Move the fucking game along!" he said, after DeJesus announced a ball. A few minutes later, after a call he disliked, he yelled, "Look at him! How can he even see over the catcher?" A man in a Mets cap nearby pointed up at the device, explaining that the calls were automated. The heckler appeared confused: "Can he overrule it?"

Mets Hat shook his head. The heckler, looking embarrassed, replied, "He's called a good game, I gotta say!"

Baseball is a game of waiting and talking. For a hundred and fifty years or so, the strike zone—the imaginary box over home plate, seventeen inches wide, and stretching from the batter's knees to the middle of his chest—has been the game's animating force. The argument between manager and umpire is where the important disputes over its boundaries are litigated. The first umpires were volunteers who wore top hats, at whom spectators "hurled curses, bottles and all manner of organic and inorganic debris," according to a paper by the Society for American Baseball Research. "Organic debris" wasn't defined, but one wonders. A handful of early umpires were killed.

Rules of engagement evolved in fits and starts. Today, everyone knows that an aggrieved party can kick dirt, but not over the plate, which the umpire maintains with his special brush. You may scream in an umpire's face, but you must never touch him. Kevin Costner's character in "Bull Durham" doesn't get ejected when he says that the ump made "a cocksucking call," but he does when he calls the man himself "a cocksucker." That's a no-no. Lip-readers or hot mikes sometimes reveal these arguments to be admirable examples of candor and of dispute resolution—two stressed-out guys trying their best, with fans or bosses breathing down their necks. More often, arguments are like stock-car wrecks: grotesque, morally indefen-

ILLUSTRATION BY EDWARD STEED

sible, and the thing a lot of people secretly root for. In 1980, the umpire Bill Haller wore a wire during a dispute with Earl Weaver, the Baltimore Orioles manager at the time:

> WEAVER: You're here and this crew is here just to fuck us! (*Haller ejects Weaver.*) That's good! That's great! And you suck!
> HALLER: Bah, you shit! (*Haller points his finger at Weaver.*)
> WEAVER: Get your finger off of me! (*Weaver slaps Haller's finger away.*)
> HALLER: I didn't touch you!
> WEAVER: You pushed your finger into me!
> HALLER: I did not! Now you're lying!
> WEAVER: No you are!
> HALLER: You are lying!
> WEAVER: You are a big liar!
> HALLER: You are a liar, Earl!
> WEAVER: You are!

This continued for nearly three minutes.

When the robots came, the arguments basically stopped. After the Ducks game, I met DeJesus outside the ballpark. "There were six calls that I disagreed with," he said, referring to the words that came through his earpiece from the robot. "One pitch was right down the middle. I went to call strike three, and it said, 'Ball,' and I went, 'Ball!' And I looked at both dugouts." No one had come out to argue. He continued, "I miss the battles." In his day job, DeJesus works as a special-education teacher on Staten Island. His commute to Islip can be three hours. The Atlantic League pays him a hundred and sixty dollars a game. His dream is to umpire the College World Series. He trains himself using a virtual-reality headset, and he rewatches footage after every game. He has worked more than six thousand games and called upward of half a million pitches. "When I first heard about A.B.S., I was very angry," he said. Rick White, the Atlantic League's president, told me, "We had some umpires go rogue. A very small percentage of them." They refused to call the pitches that the system called. One unhappy umpire called a game from ten feet or so behind his usual position, as a protest. But the system won DeJesus's respect. It was, he admitted, better than him.

During the first robo-ump season, players complained about some strange calls. M.L.B. tweaked the dimensions of the zone, and this year the consensus has been that A.B.S. is profoundly consistent—and bound for the major leagues. The Ducks manager, the former Mets second baseman Wally Backman, is known for being an enthusiastic arguer; he once threw dozens of bats onto the infield after an ejection. ("Pick that shit up, you dumb motherfuckers!") But he loves the machines. Smoking Marlboro Reds in the grandstand one day, he told me, "It's gonna be in the major leagues in a lot shorter time than people think." M.L.B. has already concluded that the device is near-perfect, precise to within fractions of an inch. "It's going to be more accurate, it'll reduce controversy in the game, and be good for the game," the M.L.B. commissioner, Rob Manfred, has said. But the question is whether controversy is worth reducing, or whether, like the scratches and grooves on a vinyl LP, it is the sign of a human hand. Joe Torre, the former Yankees manager, who now works in the commissioner's office, has argued publicly against the robots. "It's an imperfect game and has always felt perfect to me," he said.

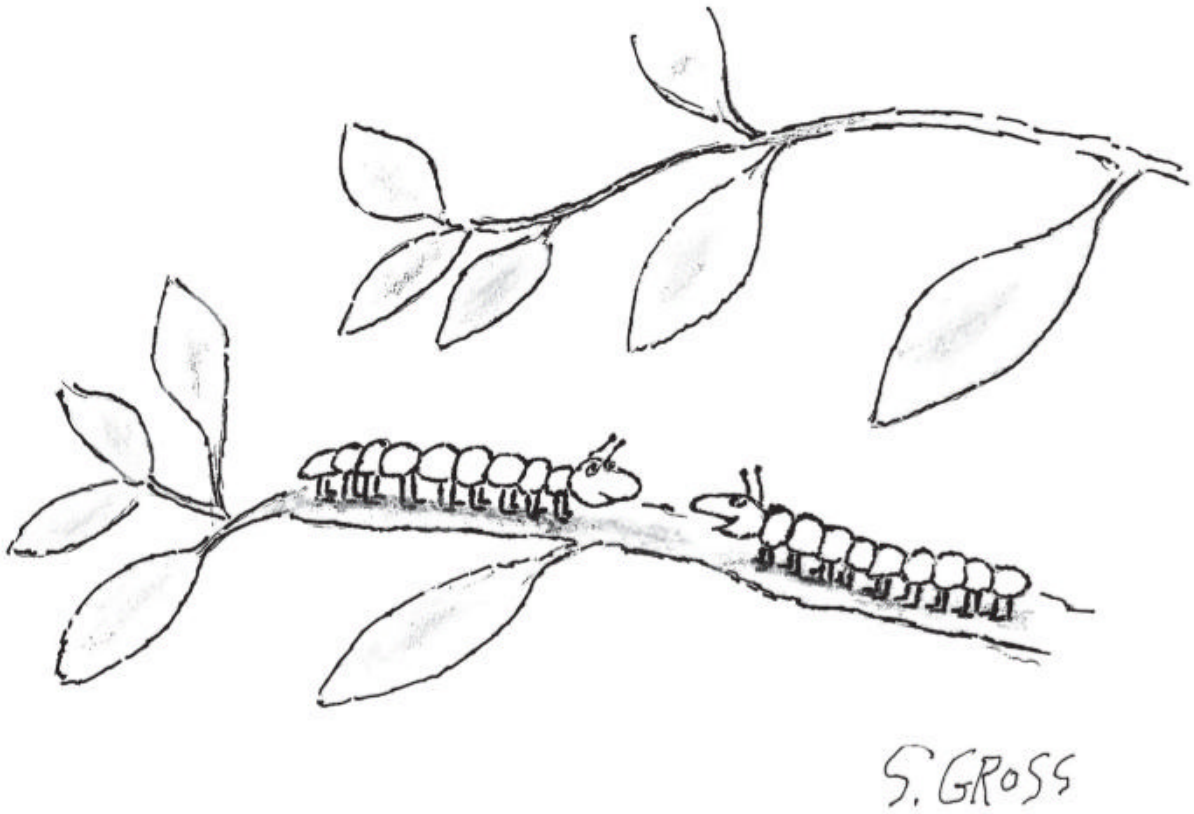
A human, at least, yells back. When I spoke with Frank Viola, the pitching coach for the High Point Rockers, an Atlantic League team in North Carolina, he said that A.B.S. worked as designed, but that it was also unforgiving and pedantic, almost legalistic. "Manfred is a lawyer," Viola noted. Some pitchers have complained that, compared with a human's, the robot's zone seemed small. Viola was once an excellent big-leaguer himself. When he was pitching, he said, umpires rewarded skill. Throw it where you aimed, and it would be a strike, even if it was an inch or two outside. There was a dialogue between pitcher and umpire. During the first inning of the Rockers' first game using A.B.S., Viola said, "my guy on the mound threw three pitches *right there*. And all the pitches were strikes!" A.B.S. said otherwise. This got Viola frustrated. Which is how he became the first person to get ejected for arguing with the robot.

Machines replaced the film projectionist and the subway attendant, and, chances are, they will eventually replace us all. The umpire can already seem a man out of time, like a milkman or a doctor who makes house calls. Maybe it's the uniforms. The average umpire is male, white, and conservative. (No women have worked the majors outside of spring training; until last year, there were no Black crew chiefs.) Perhaps he smokes Winston Lights. His backup career may have been in law enforcement. A visitor to an umpire-training academy twenty years ago discovered that everyone there was obsessed with "NYPD Blue." Umpires are talented, diligent, and seem to be ethically unimpeachable—there's been only one case of umpire corruption, ever, and that was in 1882. But accuracy fluctuates by era. There are compelling claims that the nineties were anarchy. (Ted Barrett, a Christian minister, and an umpire since 1994, once recalled that, when he started out, the profession was full of boozing and carousing. "How can I put this delicately?" he said. "It was a devil's playground.") In response, in 2001, M.L.B. instituted video evaluations to enforce uniformity. The league says that umpires now call an astounding ninety-seven per cent of pitches correctly.

The evaluations began a season before Michael Lewis started working on his book "Moneyball." Soon, teams, in their thirst for data, began using tracking systems to measure such things as a ball's velocity off the bat and a pitch's spin rate. Fans could access the data online. It was suddenly possible to know every time an umpire erred. In a typical season, one study showed, this happened about thirty-five thousand times—enough to decide a game's winner and loser regularly. Calls for automation grew insistent.

The executive tasked with running the experiment for M.L.B. is Morgan Sword, who's in charge of baseball operations. He's red-headed, thirty-six, and amiable, a boyhood fan of the Mike Piazza Mets. In late spring, I joined him at the baseball headquarters, in midtown, along with Reed MacPhail, who oversees the system's testing and validation. MacPhail played ball, briefly, at Claremont McKenna College. His batting average was .833. Four of his five hits, he noted, came against CalTech, which hadn't won a game in twenty years.

According to Sword, A.B.S. was part of a larger project to make baseball more



"Let's play footsie."

• •

exciting. Executives are terrified of losing younger fans and worry that the sport is at risk of becoming the next horse racing or boxing. "We started this process by asking ourselves and our fans, 'What version of baseball do you love the most?'" he said. Everyone wanted more action: more hits, more defense, more baserunning. This style of baseball essentially hasn't existed since the eighties. The "Moneyball" era and the hundred-mile-an-hour fastball, difficult to hit and to control, have flattened the game into strikeouts, walks, and home runs—actions lacking much action.

Sword's team brainstormed potential fixes. "Any rule that we have, we've talked about changing: change the bats, change the balls, change the bases, change the geometry of the field, change the number of players on the field, change the batting order, change the number of innings, the number of balls and strikes," Sword said. "We talked about regulating the height of grass on the infield to speed up ground balls and create more hits. We've never talked about this in any *serious* way, but we talked about allowing fans to throw home-run balls back and keep them in play. That's one that *I* don't even like."

Sword views A.B.S. "not as a change in itself but as a vehicle. Once you get the technology right, you can load any strike zone you want into that system." A strike zone exists that could create a perfect version of baseball, but it might be a triangle, or a blob, or something shaped like Texas. Sword and MacPhail toyed with ovals and slanted rectangles. "A lot just didn't pass the test of 'If you're playing Wiffle ball in the back yard, could you enforce that strike zone?'" MacPhail said.

Over time, as baseball evolves, A.B.S. can allow the zone to change with it, functioning like an engine's governor. "The human umpires are remarkably accurate, and they're the best in the world at what they do," Sword said. But learning and calling a new strike zone could take years. "On A.B.S., it's literally a matter of, like, changing a setting." M.L.B., in its labor deal with the umpires' union, which declined to comment, agreed to include the union in any plans to use A.B.S. in the major leagues. Such a move would likely meet with resistance from the rank and file. "It is the umpire's decision to make whether it's a ball or strike," Joe West, who earlier this year broke the record for most major-league games umpired (fifty-three hundred and seventy-six), and who formerly served as the union's president, told me. He argued that a disaster scenario would be a pitch in, say, the World Series failing to register on the machine, leading to chaos. (M.L.B. says such a scenario is highly unlikely, and that, in any case, the human umpire could step in to make the call.)

M.L.B. has already concluded that the technology works. Now the organization is measuring outcomes. This year, it rolled out the experiment to a class-A league in Florida. (That league uses a device made by a company called Hawk-Eye, instead of the one from TrackMan; M.L.B. is likely to use Hawk-Eye if the system reaches the major leagues.)

Sword invited me to watch a Ducks game wearing an umpire's TrackMan headset. It was a pleasant summer night. A few kids blew duck whistles. The TrackMan's green eye glowed. The "strike!" call in my ear was peppy, congratulatory. The "ball" sounded faintly disappointed. I followed each pitch on an app, which displayed the ball's location as it crossed the plate. I tried to guess each call. Even from my seat directly behind home plate, I barely had a sense of whether a ball was a foot outside or right down the middle. It was pointed out to me that, were I to switch places with the umpire, almost no one would notice.

Before another Ducks game, I visited the umpires' locker room. DeJesus wore a T-shirt that said "RING EM UP." John Dooley, the Atlantic League's supervisor of umpires, was sitting nearby. The umpiring crew was talking about a robo-umped Atlantic League game the previous evening in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

"Wanna know how long it took?" Dooley said. He had a Queens accent so thick it sounded Bostonian. "Five houahs! Sixteen to fourteen. Nine innings."

"Thirty-five walks!" DeJesus said—a horrific amount.

I asked DeJesus if he'd ever called a game with thirty-five walks.

"With TrackMan or without?" he said. "Without, it's called 'pitch management.' A lot of guys call it 'cheating.' If I start to feel that the game is dragging and we're not getting a flow, you're gonna have more strikes called. Not anymore. It used to be, if you have two borderline pitches in a row, one gets called a strike, one gets called a ball. Every-

body is equally upset, and everybody's equally happy. For me, it's 'Can we get through this today without everybody killing each other?'"

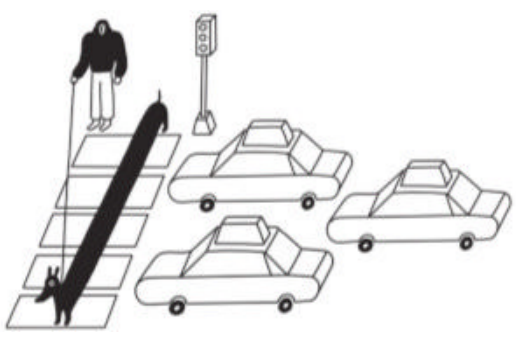
In the past twenty years, sports have moved away from these kinds of judgment calls, seeking more precision. This may be owing to technological improvement, or to corporatized gambling. ("People are betting a lot of money," Joe Maddon, the Angels' manager, who in 2016 led the Cubs to their first World Series in a hundred and eight years, explained before a recent game. "They truly want the accurate outcome.") Soccer has Video Assistant Referees. Tennis has Hawk-Eye. For almost a decade, baseball has used instant replay on the base paths. This is widely liked, even if the precision can cause its own problems; one umpire told me he had to overturn a call when the video showed a loose string on a fielder's glove grazing a runner's back—technically, this counted as a tag. But these applications deal with something physical: bases, lines, goals. The boundaries of action are precise, delineated like the keys of a piano. The strike zone is a fretless bass. Historically, a certain discretion has been appreciated.

For many years, an umpire's strike zone was like an extension of his personality. Some umpires were literalists, uncompromising. Some preferred expediency; their boundaries were enormous. No matter who was working, when it rained suddenly everything was a strike. West, the record-holding umpire, is a burly man with a Carolina drawl who moonlights as a country singer and used to pal around with Merle Haggard. He told me one umpire described the old standard for learning the strike zone as "You call them strikes until someone goes, 'Hey!'" Another of his friends liked to say, "The strike zone is like a television set, and every now and then you need Earl Weaver or Billy Martin"—the Yankees' volatile manager in the seventies and eighties—"to come out and adjust the knob." Martin once sent an umpire a Christmas card that read "I hope you and your family have a wonderful holiday season." On the inside, he wrote, "Because you sure had a horseshit summer." Video evaluation has reined in some quirks, but the strike zone still changes measurably depending on the score, the team batting, and the pitcher's race. When a pitcher is struggling, the zone becomes as much as fifty per cent bigger. This is known as the "compassionate-umpire effect."

Of course, compassion toward the pitcher is cruelty toward the hitter. "I don't know of any other sport in which the umpires would even talk about making up their own rulebook," Bill James, a writer and a former Red Sox executive, widely considered the godfather of advanced statistics, told me. Joe Sheehan, a sportswriter and one of the earliest and most fervent proponents of the automatic zone, told me, "I get literally angry when I see a pitch three inches off the plate called a strike. Like, No way. The hitter did his job, and this middle manager behind the plate basically reversed what should have happened." The Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh, a textualist, once delivered a treatise called "The Judge as Umpire." "We do not design our own strike zones," he said.

In 2019, the robo-ump followed the rulebook strike zone to the letter. Players complained: it was too high, too narrow, and things got weird around the edges. M.L.B. adjusted the parameters in 2021. A three-dimensional zone was jettisoned for a two-dimensional one. The zone was shortened and widened. Now a ball skimming an inch and a half *off* home plate counts as a strike.

This has always been a gray area. Context determined the call. In 1956, the Yankees' Don Larsen delivered baseball's



most famous pitching performance, a perfect game in the World Series. The game ended on a called strikeout. The umpire was Babe Pinelli—a newsboy at ten, a steelworker at twelve, he'd called thirty-four hundred games in a row without sitting one out. The last pitch of the last at-bat of his last game behind the plate is the only one anybody remembers. Most observers swear that it was noticeably outside. Stephen Jay Gould, in "Triumph and Tragedy in Mudville," argued that the pitch did miss the zone—and that Pinelli was correct to call strike three. It was close enough for history. "Truth is a circumstance, not a spot," Gould wrote.

In 2010, Armando Galarraga, a pitcher for the Detroit Tigers, was one out away from his own perfect game. With two outs in the ninth inning, he induced a weak ground ball. The throw beat the runner by a step: an easy call. Inexplicably, the umpire in the field, Jim Joyce, called the runner safe. The perfect game was ruined. On seeing the replay after the game, Joyce was distraught. He cursed in the clubhouse. He spent the night at his mother's (she lived nearby), chain-smoking. He received death threats. The next day, on the field, Galarraga embraced him and released him from guilt. Joyce cried. They later became friends.

Within a few seasons, M.L.B. instituted instant replay for plays on the base paths. "I lovingly say that I'm the poster boy," Joyce told me recently. I asked if he felt the same way about A.B.S. What if there had been robo-umps when he was breaking in to the minors? "I would have continued driving a truck for U.P.S.," he said. "Anybody can go back there and have somebody else tell you what to do. You might as well just watch a video game." I asked if he thought it best that his bad call couldn't be overturned, given how it all worked out. "Ask Armando," he said.

When I did, Galarraga told me, "The story is so beautiful because of what happened in the end." He wouldn't want to change it. He argued that mistakes are part of the game—accepting them with composure or exploiting them to your advantage are skills, just as throwing a good fastball is. He noted that, before he lost his perfect game, he'd had success with his sinkerball, a pitch he threw a couple of inches off the outside edge of the plate. He'd realized that the umpire was consistently calling it a strike. Using A.B.S., he said, would be like driving a car with a navigation system: "When you don't have the G.P.S., you have to pay way more attention to the directions. You have to be more in the

moment. This is the beauty of the game."

Bill James suggested that enough significant mistakes from umpires could, from a fan's perspective, make a game seem almost arbitrary. He offered a middle ground: A.B.S. could rule on obvious balls or strikes. But a couple of inches around the border would be a "zone of discretion"—up to a living, breathing umpire to decide.

Alva Noë, a professor of philosophy at Berkeley, completed "Infinite Baseball: Notes from a Philosopher at the Ballpark" just before M.L.B. announced the robo-umps. I e-mailed him, wondering if he'd given the new development any thought. "Hardly a day goes by that I don't wake up and run through the reasons that this is such a terrible idea," he replied. He later told me, "This is part of a movement to use algorithms to take the hard choices of living out of life." A pitcher has a strange job. He wants to throw a pitch that is hittable but that the batter, nevertheless, can't hit. Noë argued that what the umpire adjudicates is whether the pitcher succeeded. It's inherently a judgment call. "What we're seeing in baseball is something that is kind of a core dispute in Western civilization. It really is about 'What is objectivity?' Is objectivity something that is physical? Is it mathematical? Is it knowable?"

But people want answers. Subjectivity, generally, is on the run. We prefer Yelp stars and Big Data dating apps. May a thousand Tomatometers bloom. Recent decades have birthed baseball's own theory-of-everything statistic, WAR (wins above replacement), which does a decent job of ending the barstool argument about which player is the best. The big-money jobs these days are in data analytics; hard numbers make vaccines and launch rockets. If you're trading baseball players, you'd better know their value. But what you're measuring matters. Accuracy is not the same thing as enjoyment. We watch baseball to kill time, not to maximize it.

TrackMan was created to quantify and optimize. The company broke into baseball, as a player-analysis tool, in 2008. Soon, it was everywhere. "There was a while there when we were tracking and facilitating a sharing of data from just about every pitch of every play of every professional game in the world," John Olshan, who runs the company's baseball business, told me. For the robo-umpires, professional baseball was only a starting point. Olshan predicted that the system would reach all levels of the game, down to Little League. TrackMan sells a portable version of the hardware, intended to help players train. But it can also tell you if a pitch is in the strike zone. He invited me to try it out in a beer league.

The Passaic Bulls, according to their player-manager, Joe Moran, are perhaps the best men's-league team in New Jersey. "You say our name, people know us," he told me. Moran is twenty-six, a former construction worker—Local 754. During the pandemic, he lost his job, so he became a COVID disinfector. "One of those guys who comes into a place and fogs it up, with the hazmat suits and all that," he said. "I honestly think I put more hours into baseball."

Moran happily agreed to let me use the Bulls as robo-umpire guinea pigs. "There's a big umpire shortage, so some of the umpires they get us are really bad," he told me. I'd heard this often. Gil Imber, a former recreational umpire, who runs something called the Umpire Ejection Fantasy League ("Joe West is always a top draftee"), told me that the supply of umpires generally runs opposite to the economy. Strangely, the current unemployment spike hasn't created new umpires—likely, Imber says, because the pay has stagnated, and the abuse has not.

The game was in Passaic at Third Ward Park: old stone wall in the outfield, commuter trains rumbling fifty feet behind the backstop. The infield grass was prodigious, practically a prairie; Sword and MacPhail would've brought in the Weedwackers. Ten feet behind home plate, Will Gilbert, a former minor-league pitcher who works for TrackMan, erected a tripod, atop which he mounted the device, a miniature version of the stadium machine. With its little eye, the setup looked like the Pixar lamp. For the experiment, the umpire, a rookie named Mirquis Erazo, was making the calls, but could appeal close ones to TrackMan during the first half of the game. As a control, the second half would be old-school.

The Bulls walked the first four batters: no close calls. Tensions soon rose. When the Bulls, now trailing, came up to bat, Erazo called a ball inside, and the opposing team hollered. "That was a strike?" Erazo asked Gilbert.

"No, about five inches," Gilbert said. Not close.

"Thank you!" Erazo said. "The shortstop is already looking at me."

Erazo settled in. After four innings, the machine was making him look astonishingly good. TrackMan disagreed with him only four times, and two were really close. After one walk, the entire Bulls infield shouted in protest. Erazo gestured toward the machine. The shouting stopped. At one point, Moran ran up to the fence and yelled, "Yo, this guy's the best umpire in the league, no question!" TrackMan was a hit. The portable system cost about twenty thousand dollars. By the middle of the game, Moran was talking with Gilbert about buying one.

The tight zone, however, made for a long evening. Sometime past 10 P.M., in the eighth inning, the Bulls first baseman, a twenty-three-year-old pest-control technician named Joe Russo, took off his spikes, packed up his gear, and sat down. He took a dissenting stance toward the robots. "With technology, people just want everything to be perfect," he told me. "That's not reality. I think *perfect* would be weird. Your teams are always winning, work is always just great, there's always money in your pocket, your car never breaks down. What is there to talk about?"

Then he realized he was on deck and scampered off, retying his spikes. When his turn to bat came, the Bulls were up eight runs. The game was in its fourth hour—TrackMan had long ago been turned off. Russo took a fastball, quite high. Erazo called it a strike. The second pitch was a strike, too. On the third, he watched as another fastball came in near his shins. Erazo bellowed, "*Strike three!*" The Bulls dugout hooted. Moran yelled, "We want the robot back!" Russo looked sheepish. "That was a ball!" he said to Erazo. "But I'm not mad at you!"

After the game, I caught up with Erazo in the parking lot. He laughed when I asked about the pitch to Russo. "It was time to go, that's what it was," he said. "It *was* a ball." I told him I agreed. But who at the park could say for sure? ♦

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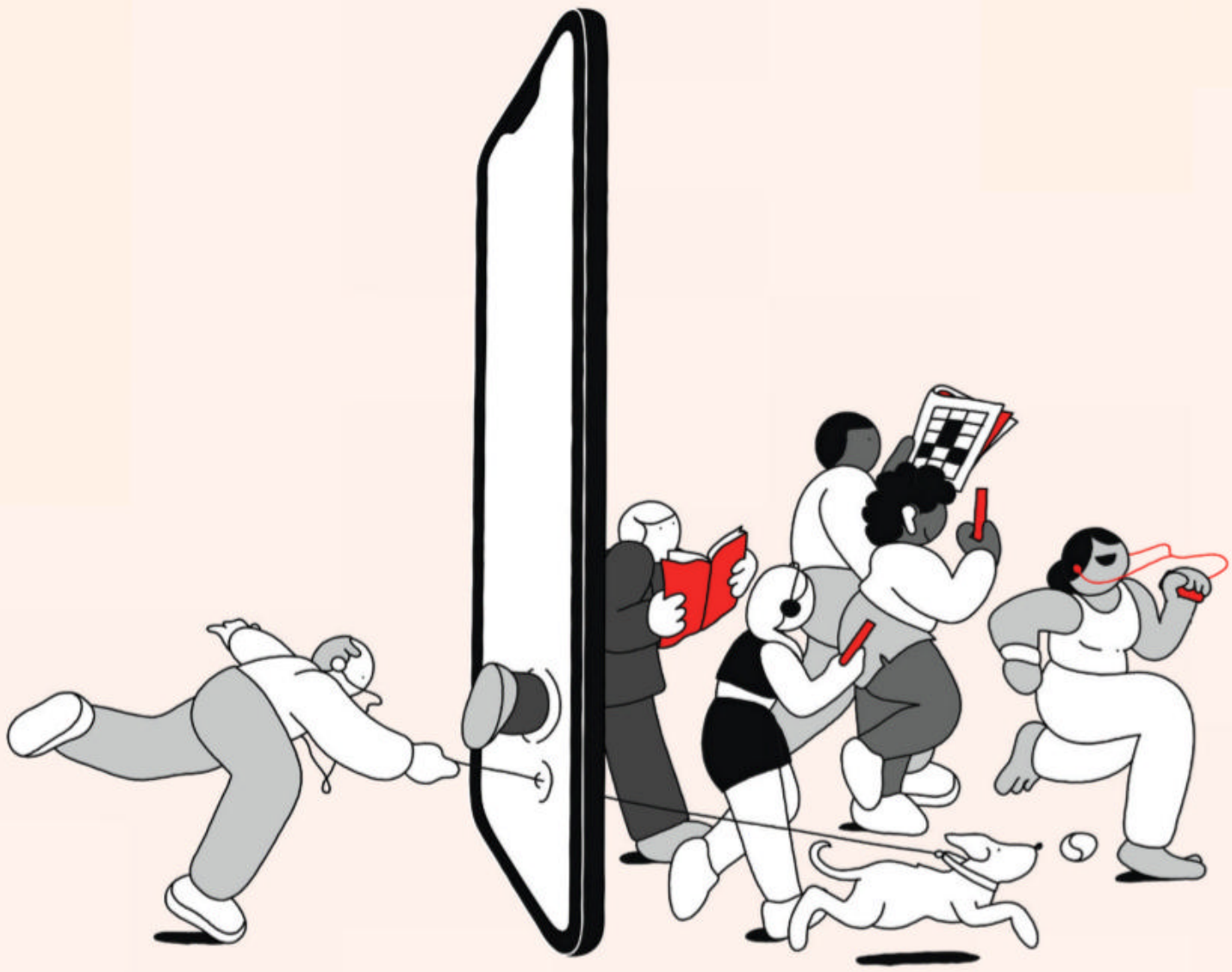

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ANNALS OF MEDICINE

THE COSTA RICA MODEL

The country's life expectancy outstrips ours. How did they do it?

BY ATUL GAWANDE

In the United States and elsewhere, public health and medical care are largely separate enterprises. Costa Rica shows the benefits

of integrating the two—it spends less than we do on health care and gets better results.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY FRED RAMOS

The cemetery in Atenas, Costa Rica, a small town in the mountains that line the country's lush Central Valley, contains hundreds of flat white crypt markers laid out in neat rows like mah-jongg tiles, extending in every direction. On a clear afternoon in April, Álvaro Salas Chaves, who was born in Atenas in 1950, guided me through the graves.

"As a child, I witnessed every day two, three, four funerals for kids," he said. "The cemetery was divided into two. One side for adults, and the other side for children, because the number of deaths was so high."

Salas grew up in a small, red-roofed farmhouse just down the road. "I was a peasant boy," he said. He slept on a straw mattress, with a woodstove in the kitchen, and no plumbing. Still, his family was among the better-off in Atenas, then a community of nine thousand people. His parents had a patch of land where they grew coffee, plantains, mangoes, and oranges, and they had three milk cows. His father also had a store on the main road through town, where he sold various staples and local produce. Situated halfway between the capital, San José, and the Pacific port city of Puntarenas, Atenas was a stop for oxcarts travelling to the coast, and the store did good business.

On the cemetery road, however, there was another kind of traffic. When someone died, a long procession of family members and neighbors trailed the coffin, passing in front of Salas's home. The images of the mourners are still with him.

"At that time, Costa Rica was the most sad country, because the infant-mortality rate was very high," he said. In 1950, around ten per cent of children died before their first birthday, most often from diarrheal illnesses, respiratory infections, and birth complications. Many youths and young adults died as well. The country's average life expectancy was fifty-five years, thirteen years shorter than that in the United States at the time.

Life expectancy tends to track national income closely. Costa Rica has emerged as an exception. Searching a newer section of the cemetery that afternoon, I found only one grave for

a child. Across all age cohorts, the country's increase in health has far outpaced its increase in wealth. Although Costa Rica's per-capita income is a sixth that of the United States—and its per-capita health-care costs are a fraction of ours—life expectancy there is approaching eighty-one years. In the United States, life expectancy peaked at just under seventy-nine years, in 2014, and has declined since.

People who have studied Costa Rica, including colleagues of mine at the research and innovation center Ariadne Labs, have identified what seems to be a key factor in its success: the country has made public health—measures to improve the health of the population as a whole—central to the delivery of medical care. Even in countries with robust universal health care, public health is usually an add-on; the vast majority of spending goes to treat the ailments of individuals. In Costa Rica, though, public health has been a priority for decades.

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the impoverished state of public health even in affluent countries—and the cost of our neglect. Costa Rica shows what an alternative looks like. I travelled with Álvaro Salas to his home town because he had witnessed the results of his country's expanding commitment to public health, and also because he had helped build the systems that delivered on that commitment. He understood what the country has achieved and how it was done.

When Salas was growing up, Atenas was a village of farmers and laborers. Cars were rare, and so were telephones. A radio was a luxury. In the country at large, barely half the population had running water or proper sanitation facilities, which led to high rates of polio, parasites, and diarrheal illness. Many children did not have enough to eat, and, between malnutrition and recurrent illnesses, their growth was often stunted. Like other societies where many die young, people had big families—seven or eight children was the average. Many children left school early, and only a quarter of girls completed primary education. Salas said that most children in Atenas started elementary school, but each year more and more were pulled out to do farmwork.

Important progress was achieved in the nineteen-fifties and sixties in Costa Rica, with the kind of basic public-health efforts made in many developing countries. Salas was in kindergarten, he thinks, when his family was able to pipe running water to their home from the nearby city center. A national latrine campaign provided people with outhouses made of cement. National power generation brought electrical wiring. "The most happy person was my mother!" he said.

Vaccination campaigns against polio, diphtheria, and rubella reached Salas and his classmates when he was in elementary school, as did a child-nutrition program that the government rolled out across the country, with aid from the Kennedy Administration. "We had this lunch—hot food," he recalled. "I still have the flavor in my mouth. It was very nice to have a plate of soup with rice." His family, with its cows and its store, was never nutritionally deprived—Salas grew to six feet—but his friends were often hungry. And so school attendance jumped. "The mothers and the families saw that it was a good idea now to send the kids to school, because they were fed," he said.

Along the way, the Ministry of Health provided an official in every community with resources and staff devoted to preventing infectious-disease outbreaks, malnutrition, toxic hazards, sanitary problems, and the like. These local public-health units, geared toward community-wide concerns, worked in parallel with a health-care system built to address individual needs. Still, both remained rudimentary in Atenas. The nearest hospital was sixteen miles away, in the city of Alajuela, and understaffed. "At that time, it was far, because the road was impossible," Salas said.

"And you can wipe that ambiguous smirk off your face this instant, young lady."

So when did Costa Rica's results diverge from others'? That started in the early nineteen-seventies: the country adopted a national health plan, which broadened the health-care coverage provided by its social-security system, and a rural health program, which brought the kind of medical services that the cities had to the rest of the country. Atenas finally got a primary-care clinic. "With two or three doctors," Salas recalled. "With five nurses. With social workers. For everything." In 1973, the social-security administration was charged with upgrading the hospital system, including in Alajuela and other rural regions. In this early period, the country spent more of its G.D.P. on the health of its people than did other countries of similar income levels—and, indeed, more than some richer ones. But what set Costa Rica apart wasn't simply the amount it spent on health care. It was how the money was spent: targeting the most readily preventable kinds of death and disability.

That may sound like common sense. But medical systems seldom focus on any overarching outcome for the communities they serve. We doctors are reactive. We wait to see who arrives at our office and try to help out with their "chief complaint." We move on to the next person's chief complaint: *What seems to be the problem*? We don't ask what our town's most important health needs are, let alone make a concerted effort to tackle them. If we were oriented toward public health, we would have been in touch with all our patients, if not everyone in the communities we serve, to schedule appointments for vaccination against the coronavirus, the No. 3 killer in the past year. We would have coördinated with public-health officials to prevent cardiovascular disease, the No. 1 killer, by jointly taking aim at high blood pressure and cholesterol, smoking, and dietary salt intake. We would have made a priority of preventing disease, rather than just treating it. But we haven't.

In the nineteen-seventies, Costa Rica identified maternal and child mortality as its biggest source of lost years of life. The public-health units directed pregnant women to prenatal care and delivery in hospitals, where officials made sure that personnel were prepared to prevent and manage the most frequent dangers, such as maternal hemorrhage, newborn respiratory failure, and sepsis. Nutrition programs helped reduce food shortages and underweight births; sanitation and vaccination campaigns reduced infectious diseases, from cholera to diphtheria; and a network of primary-care clinics delivered better treatment for children who did fall sick. Clinics also provided better access to contraception; by 1990, the average family size had dropped to just over three children.

The strategy demonstrated rapid and dramatic results. In 1970, seven per cent of children died before their first birthday. By 1980, only two per cent did. In the course of the decade, maternal deaths fell by eighty per cent. The nation's over-all life expectancy became the longest in Latin America, and kept growing. By 1985, Costa Rica's life expectancy matched that of the United States. Demographers and economists took notice. The country was the best performer among a handful of countries that seemed to defy the rule that health requires wealth.

Some people were skeptical. Costa Rica had endured numerous economic crises before 1970; perhaps the subsequent decade of economic stability had made the difference. Or maybe it was the country's large investment in education, which had lifted the proportion of girls who completed primary education from a quarter in 1960 to two-thirds in 1980. A careful statistical analysis indicated that such factors did contribute to child survival—but that eighty per cent of the gains were tied to improvements in health services. The municipalities with the best public-health coverage had the largest declines in infant mortality.

A big question remained, though: Could Costa Rica sustain its progress? Public-health strategies might be able to address mortality in childhood and young adulthood, but many people believe that adding years from middle age onward is a wholly different endeavor. Countries at this stage tend to switch approaches, deëmphasizing public health and primary care and giving priority to hospitals and advanced specialties.

Costa Rica did not change course, however. It kept going even farther down the one it was on. And that's where Álvaro Salas comes in.

Salas was an exuberant and ambitious child, and in high school he decided to become a doctor, inspired by two physician friends of his father's who told stories about treating the wounded during the Second World War. He was one of only a few from his high-school class to go to college, and one of the first in his family to do so. When he enrolled at the University of Costa Rica, then the country's sole public university, he imagined he'd return to Atenas to practice one day. As an undergraduate, though, he met people from across the country and came to understand that the gaps he'd experienced were present everywhere.

"I became very active in politics," he recalled. "But I hated the people who speak and speak and do nothing. So I decided to organize groups of premedical students to visit poor communities in the country and to bring students from the third year or fourth year in the school of medicine to treat them." Salas turned out to have a Pied Piper charm and a talent for getting things done, even as a freshman. The medical school's dean, he learned, had close connections at the Ministry of Health. He met with the dean, and came away with both medical-faculty support and ministry supplies for his venture.

In his travels, Salas discovered that many of Costa Rica's villages were even poorer than Atenas. "They had tuberculosis, they had leprosy, they had everything," he said. He continued his volunteer work through college and medical school. And, as the country adopted its national health plan and spent more on public health, he could see not only what a difference such actions made but how much remained to be done. "My goals got bigger," he said.

In 1977, after his medical internship, he went to work in the Nicoya Peninsula, on a government-funded year of social service. Now a tourist destination,

known for its beaches and for having one of the largest populations of centenarians in the world, the peninsula was then a remote and impoverished region, where medical care was sparse and lives were precarious.

Salas was put in charge of setting up a new mobile public-health unit, one of many deployed in the government's rural health program. When you work at a hospital, patients come to you. In a public-health unit, you have to go to them. Salas and his team made visits to villages along the sea. In addition to treating patients, they conducted household surveys, and pieced together diagnoses of whole communities. He found high rates of severe anemia among women, water contaminated with parasites, and outbreaks of respiratory infections. Owing to the new reforms, Salas could now do something about what he observed. Members of his team distributed iron tablets and vitamins and basic medicines such as antiparasitics and antibiotics. They helped organize sites for clean drinking water. They fought malaria and outbreaks of other infectious diseases. And, in the data they collected and the people they encountered, Salas could see the benefits.

At year's end, he was hired at a hospital in Puntarenas. But, after his experience in Nicoya, he did not think the way most clinicians do. "At that time in Costa Rica, it was very common to see people with blankets outside the hospital, pillows, waiting for a bed," he told me. Elsewhere, people were living in squatter settlements and slums without roads, electricity, or sanitation. "For me, it was very clear that hospitals have a role, but we have to work at the community level first." The government was building a housing development for around a thousand residents in a barrio called El Roble. Salas proposed to the hospital director that one of the new houses be turned into a neighborhood clinic—to save people from having to go to the hospital.

Salas's voluble exuberance was again persuasive. The director gave him a staff of two, and the housing authority gave him a house. The clinic was small, with a waiting room in front and an examining room in back. Just as in Nicoya, he and his team went door to door, creating a record for every family.

"Didn't people find that strange?" I asked.

"I had a very nice uniform," Salas said, laughing. "Green surgery scrubs."

He was a bear of a man, with a walrus mustache, a desk-drawer chin, and a head of dark, wavy hair; his ebullience was tempered with an air of kindness. No one in El Roble turned him away. "We knew everything," he said. "Who is pregnant, who has a child, who has a malnutrition problem."

Salas became a neighborhood doctor and a public-health officer rolled into one. In addition to drawing blood for basic lab tests, he and his team collected stool samples to look for parasites. Because they also tested for blood in the stool, Salas detected one patient's colon cancer early enough that it could be treated before it spread.

A few months after opening the clinic, Salas asked the hospital to let him open another. The director again said yes. "Because the results were very good," Salas said. "They had less people coming to the hospital—less lines, less waiting lists." He set up a physician and more nurses in another Puntarenas barrio, a poorer one. "Again, the results were very good."

Then, one day, he got a call from a regional director of the country's health-care agency, the C.C.S.S., known simply as "the Caja" ("the Fund").

"He was so angry, so angry," Salas said. Salas had been commandeering C.C.S.S. doctors, nurses, and funds without going through proper channels. His engine of charm hit a barrier. "Who approved this project?" he recalls the director demanding.

"I am responsible," Salas replied.

"No, you are not responsible," the director told him. "You are *irresponsible*. Irresponsible in the worst sense possible, because you are making crazy things without any kind of studies."

The director delivered Salas's punishment. Salas, at the age of twenty-eight, was to be the new head of the city's central clinic. He was being kicked upstairs. "I had to move from El Roble to the center," he said. He accepted it, but he didn't give up: "I found that I had now my own resources, my own nurses, my own doctors. So I decided to continue with the project, but in silence."

The next election brought a change of government, and the new head of the C.C.S.S. was someone Salas knew from medical school. "So I went to San José saying, 'Doctor, I have this project,'" he recalled. He brought pictures of the El Roble clinic, clicking through slides on a Kodak carrousel. The executive was impressed. "He said to me, 'You have to show this to the President.'"

They took the carrousel of slides to the President's office that day. "The thing is that he used to live in Puntarenas," Salas said. "So the President loved Puntarenas—*loved*." He offered to provide whatever Salas needed. "I had a year in paradise with resources. That was amazing."

It was the late nineteen-seventies, however, and the oil crisis brought hyperinflation. Budgets were cut; jobs were lost. The El Roble clinic abruptly closed. Around the same time, across the northern border of Costa Rica, the Sandinistas had taken power in Nicaragua, in a bloody civil war. Hundreds of thousands of people were homeless. Many doctors had fled. Salas ventured north and found work in Nicaragua's new government, helping to rebuild the health-care system along its impoverished Mosquito Coast, where no one else wanted to go.

After three years, he returned to Costa Rica. Salas was now married to a young woman from Atenas and about to become a father. He took a job as a general practitioner in the city of San Carlos, and then found one in San Ramón, closer to his home town. There, a physician named Juan Guillermo Ortiz Guier had built a program called Hospital Without Walls, which had opened health posts not dissimilar to Salas's El Roble clinic—but in dozens of neighborhoods. "That inspired me," Salas said. He began talking to Ortiz and working with friends on a proposal to bring the essential concepts to Costa Rica's entire health system.

During the next eight years, Salas was promoted to run a major hospital in the capital and earned a master's degree at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, but in 1990 he finally got the chance to put his ideas into action.

He was appointed to lead policy development for the C.C.S.S., the Caja, working with a staff of fifty. Together, they delivered a plan for a universal system of care that would braid together public health and individual health.

The plan had three principal elements. First, it would merge the public-health services of the Ministry of Health with the Caja's system of hospitals and clinics—two functions that governments, including ours, typically keep separate—and so allow public-health officials to set objectives for the health-care system as a whole. Second, the Caja would integrate a slew of disparate records, combining data about household conditions and needs with the medical-record system, and would use the information to guide national priorities, set targets, and track progress. Third, every Costa Rican would be assigned to a local primary-health-care team, called an EBAIS ("eh-by-*ees*"), for Equipo Básico de Atención Integral en Salud, which would include a physician, a nurse, and a trained community-health worker known as an ATAP (Asistente Técnico en Atención Primaria). Each team would cover about four or five thousand people. The ATAPs would visit every household in their assigned population at least once a year, in order to assess health needs and to close the highest-priority gaps—the way Salas's team in El Roble had done.

Álvaro Salas brought his work at community clinics to bear on national policy.

The plan was at once breathtaking in scope and beautifully simple, and the President embraced it immediately. Funding it took longer. Although Costa Rica had a long track record of stability and economic growth, international financial institutions resisted Salas's proposal. Providing real primary care, with a doctor on each team, would be too expensive, the World Bank said. "We could have a small package of basic services, no more than that," Salas told me, recalling the negotiations. "But we already had that!" Hospitals were at capacity, and he insisted that the solution wasn't just to build more of them.

In 1994, the loans finally came through, and the plan was submitted to the legislative assembly, where it passed unanimously. A new government was elected, under the center-left President José María Figueres, but the plan had its full support. In fact, Figueres appointed Salas to be the head of the C.C.S.S.

Getting the bill passed without opposition would seem no small feat: Salas had made his pitch to a center-right government, then retained the backing of a center-left one. But, if such unanimity is hard to imagine in the United States, President Figueres told me that it wasn't surprising in Costa Rica. "This is something which, in our culture, is politically easy to sell," he said. It would put a doctor, a nurse, and a community-health worker in every neighborhood. Who could object to that?

Still, by the time Salas got the financing, there were just three years until the next election. So he rolled out the plan at breakneck speed. By 1998, when the government changed again and he left his post, the country had established enough EBAIS teams to reach about half the population, beginning with underserved rural areas. At that point, he wasn't worried that the program would be dismantled. "It was in the news," he said. "On the TV. We started in the north and then in the south. It became like a fashion to have an EBAIS. Everybody wanted one. The pressure to have an EBAIS became impossible to control." By 2006, nearly the entire population had been enrolled with an EBAIS. Universal insurance coverage—to pay for hospitalizations and specialized care—would take longer. But universal primary care, delivered by more than a

thousand local teams and with an emphasis on prevention and public health, was now a reality.

Today, Álvaro Salas lives with his wife in San José and continues to advise the government, political figures, and, through media appearances, the public. He is seventy years old, with a fringe of short gray hair and a trim salt-and-pepper mustache. His attire leans toward track shoes with khakis and an Apple Watch. When I asked him to accompany me as I visited Atenas this spring, an outbreak of COVID-19 was rippling across the country. The pandemic had been under control for a year in Costa Rica, but more contagious variants had arrived and the I.C.U.s were full.

On a sunlit, tropical morning, we made our way into town, past the palm-tree-filled park and the Spanish-style parish church, to the Atenas central clinic, a jumble of airy, low-slung, cream-colored buildings. Leonardo Herrera, an ATAP in the area, was preparing to head out for the morning's home visits. In an open garage beside the clinic, several rows of elderly residents had just received COVID vaccines and were waiting in chairs for their observation period to end. For the now roughly thirty thousand people who live in Atenas and the surrounding area, there are seven fully staffed and equipped EBAIS teams.

ATAPs, a category of clinician we don't have, combine the skills of a medical worker and a public-health aide. They are professionally trained, salaried, and proud. Herrera, whose dark eyes showed a desire to get moving, wore a long-sleeved white shirt, blue pants, and black shoes, with credentials dangling from a lanyard around his neck. He carried with him a backpack of medical supplies, a tablet computer, and a cooler of COVID vaccines.

Each ATAP is responsible for visiting all the people assigned to his or her team, which for Herrera represented about fourteen hundred households. The homes are grouped into three categories. Priority 1 homes have an elderly person living alone or an individual with a severe disability, an uncontrolled chronic disease, or a high-risk condition; they average three preventive visits a year. Priority 2 homes have occupants with more moderate risk and get two visits a year. The rest are Priority 3 homes and get one visit a year.

That day, Herrera was bringing vaccines to Priority 1 patients who were unable to travel to the clinic. In Atenas, home visits are made on white Honda scooters or off-road motorcycles. In the most remote region, Salas told me, ATAPs must use boats or even horses to reach some families. We followed Herrera's scooter in our car, along smoothly paved roads up and down green hills, to our first stop, a one-story stucco house with a fresh coat of yellow paint. Out front was a strange wrought-iron structure—an ornate crate on a chest-high post. Salas explained: you put your garbage bag in the holder on pickup day so street dogs don't get at it. All the houses had one, each baroquely different from the next.

A middle-aged man ushered us inside. A bookkeeper for local businesses, he lived with and cared for his mother, who had soft, probing eyes and advanced Alzheimer's. The house had four rooms: two bedrooms, a kitchen, and a bathroom. In the front bedroom, the mother sat on the edge of a hospital bed that almost filled the space. Herrera checked her vital signs, including her temperature and her oxygen level, with a thermometer and a finger sensor from his backpack. He asked her and her son a few questions about how she'd been doing, including after her first vaccine dose, which he'd given her three weeks earlier.

Behind the house, on a stone porch that opened onto a green postage-stamp lawn, Herrera pulled out a rectangle of brown butcher paper, flattened it on a table, and laid out all the vaccination materials. He went to the kitchen sink to wash his hands, using his own soap and paper towels.

Herrera's visit took about twenty minutes. As we headed down the road, I was struck not only by the efficiency of the visit but also by how ordinary it was: the man had been able to take it for granted that Herrera would visit on a certain day at a certain time to meet certain needs.

I saw this reliability throughout our visits. Because everyone was enrolled with an EBAIS, everyone was contacted individually about a COVID vaccination appointment—most at their neighborhood clinic and a few at home. One woman I met explained that she'd learned about her appointment by phone. I asked her what would happen if the EBAIS folks didn't call. She looked at me puzzled. Maybe something was lost in translation. She repeated that she knew what week they would call, and they called. I persisted: What if they didn't? She'd wait a couple of days and call herself, she said. It was no big deal. She asked me how things worked where I was from. I could only sigh.

One of our visits that morning was to a brick house ringed by purple-flowered crape-myrtle trees. An eighty-year-old woman sat on the porch getting her hair dyed; during the pandemic, her hair stylist was also doing home visits. In a corner bedroom with lots of light, a small man with a regal profile and a shock of white hair was sitting up in a hospital bed, beneath a poster of Jesus. Tubing connected his nasal prongs to a large oxygen tank, its attached water-bubbler faintly audible. Salas recognized the man, who had been his father's accountant. The man smiled brightly in greeting, but showed no sign of recognition. He had vascular dementia and chronic pulmonary disease.

Up a winding mountain road, we reached a house with a huge mango tree standing sentinel, and dozens of ripe mangoes scattered beneath it. This time it was Salas who was recognized—his father had been the godfather of the seventy-eight-year-old man who lived there, with his wife. To Salas's delight, the man pointed out a fading, sepia-toned picture of his godfather on the wall. The man, who had congestive heart failure and limited mobility, took the vaccine without complaint.

For each of the households, Herrera keeps an electronic *ficha familiar*, a family file that provides the primary-care team with remarkably detailed information. This includes medical updates—what ailments have been assessed and what treatments have been administered on any given visit—but also notes on living conditions: whether

the floors are dirt or finished, whether there is a refrigerator, a phone, or a computer, and even whether any animals are living "*en condiciones insalubres*." According to the C.C.S.S., nearly sixty per cent of Costa Rica's households have a current, geo-referenced file.

There was nothing magical about the care I saw that day. Herrera wasn't a saint. But he may have been something better than that: he was the point of contact between a national system and a great many individual lives, seeing to every small detail required for the broader demands of community health.

Salas and I returned to the central clinic, where we met with the medical director of the Atenas Health Area, Carolina Amador. She is in her late forties, with long auburn hair and a quiet, observant air, and she oversees all seven EBAIS teams. Like Salas, she had wanted to be a doctor since she was in high school. And she, too, took the opportunity offered to Costa Rican medical graduates to spend a year working in an isolated community. It was around the time the EBAIS system was being launched, and she spent that year helping to provide primary care for an island fishing village, where basic supplies had to be delivered by boat. "I did Pap smears with a flashlight," she recalled, sitting in her office behind a large wooden desk.

Amador has overseen the Atenas Health Area for seventeen years. She says that the hardest part of her job involves human resources. "People want the director to be their parent, their adviser, their friend, and someone who can get them anything they want," she said. "I am their psychologist, too. Everyone is motivated differently."

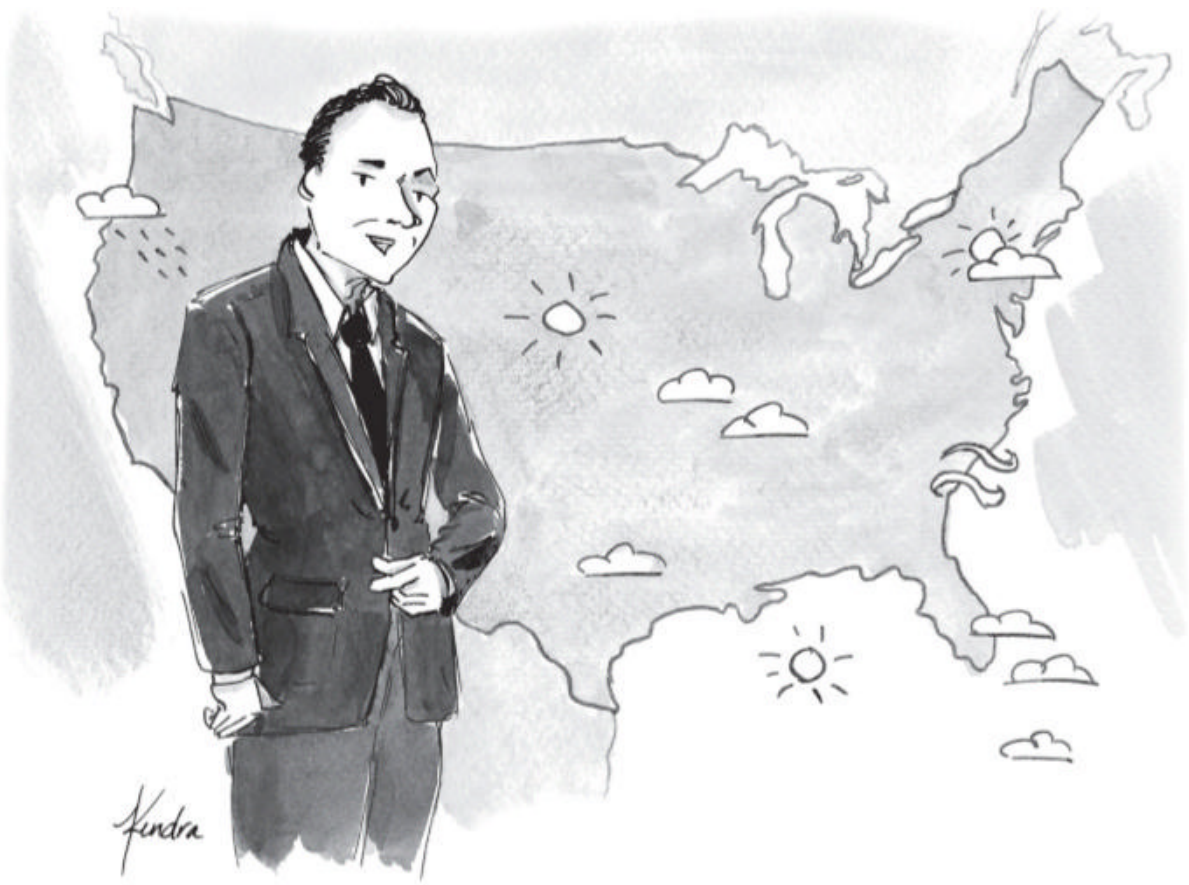
She wants all the members of her teams to understand that their priority is "the relationship with the community, not just between the physician and patient." This, she said, is the foundation of the EBAIS system. There are critical services that have to reach everyone in the community at every stage of life, she explained. Children have regular pediatric visits, starting from the first days of life. Pregnant women have their prenatal and postnatal checks. All adults have tests and follow-up visits to prevent and treat everything from iron deficiency to H.I.V. It's all free. If people don't show up for their appointments, she makes sure their team finds out why and figures out what can be done.

Amador described a group program that her staff created for people who have poorly controlled diabetes. They meet on Mondays for two hours in a twelve-week course covering topics from cooking proper meals to administering their insulin. They learn far more than they would in sporadic office visits, and they become a group of peers who know and encourage one another. Amador and her colleagues have documented substantial reductions in blood-sugar levels. That led them to create other groups, including a Zoom forum that was begun as adolescent depression rose during the pandemic—the forum drew ninety teen-agers—and a nutrition program for bus drivers, who have been found to have a high rate of obesity.

Salas was grinning. Everything he had created with his clinic in El Roble, everything he'd tried to build into the EBAIS system almost three decades ago, had come fully to life in his home town. A generation of professionals like Amador and Herrera had embraced his belief that individual health and public health are inseparable.

Integrating the two has effects that aren't so visible to patients. I spent the next morning with Mario Quesada, the primary-care physician for an EBAIS team serving the mountainside neighborhoods of Altos de Naranjo and San Isidro. Each week, he spends three days seeing patients at a clinic halfway up the mountain, and two days at a site on *top* of the mountain. I visited the one halfway up. It looked much like any other house on the street, which seemed to be the standard design for such clinics. Quesada, who is forty-one, wore a pin-striped, short-sleeved shirt and a microphone headset; during the pandemic, half his appointments have been virtual.

By eight o'clock that morning, he'd already seen three patients—he'd diagnosed a benign rash, a goiter, and an ear infection. The first visit I observed was a telehealth appointment in which he advised a woman with migraines about a change in medication, typing up his notes as they spoke. These were routine visits, and would have been



"The weather this morning will be freezing in your house because of your cheap husband, followed by a beautiful temperate stretch in your car. Late morning, you'll see a change to crazy hot because Cheryl sets the office temperature and Cheryl apparently wants everyone soaked in their own sweat."

recognizable to primary-care doctors all over the world.

Yet a couple of the visits I observed made apparent the subtle strengths of the EBAIS approach. One involved, as Quesada put it, "*un caso difícil*"—an incontinent sixty-five-year-old woman with schizophrenia. The woman, who lives with her daughter, also has a psychiatrist and a social worker. That day, she needed her prescriptions refilled. But Quesada also saw a note in her *ficha familiar* about family circumstances which led him to ask her about her supply of diapers. The EBAIS provides up to forty a month, which was enough until her bowel troubles worsened recently. Quesada suspected that her daughter might not be able to afford more, and learned that the woman was indeed short. He did a quick check of the records and found that another family had returned a box of diapers after an elder died. She could have the box, he said. It was a small thing. But a lack of such basic supplies could mean the breakdown of skin from sitting too long in stool, and lead to infection and wound-care problems. Quesada's simple reallocation of resources was possible only because he had a bigger picture of the community he serves.

In another telehealth visit, a woman with diabetes and severe hypertension complained that she had been waiting more than a year to get follow-up blood tests. When Quesada consulted her records online, he saw that he had ordered the tests months earlier, but the woman hadn't shown up for any of them. He told her where to go for her lab tests and filled out the lab orders that she'd need. He could have told her to pick up the order slips, but she'd failed to do that before, too. So Quesada looked through the upcoming appointment list and noticed that a neighbor of hers would be at the clinic soon. He told the woman he'd send her lab orders with the neighbor.

That level of familiarity—the fact that he understood the community around his patient and how it could help—was astounding to me, even as the limitations seemed apparent.

"She's not going to get her tests done, is she?" I said.

"It's fifty-fifty," he said. "One can only do so much. I do my work. They must do theirs."

In my discussions with clinicians and patients, the weaknesses in the system were not hard to find. With Costa Rica's constrained resources, there was not enough staffing, especially for specialists. When it came to secondary care, months-long waits for advanced imaging and for procedures were common. People who could afford to do so carried additional insurance for private health care or paid cash to supplement the care that they received from the government. But the EBAIS system remains immensely popular, and politically untouchable. It has advantages that patients can *feel*, even if they don't see all the inner workings.

Near the end of my conversation with Carolina Amador, she explained her approach to the pandemic, and she called up a graph on her computer that showed up-to-the-moment rates of COVID cases and deaths by age, sex, and neighborhood. In Angeles, for instance, three per cent of the population had been infected; in Santa Eulalia, nine per cent had been. It was the kind of report I'd seen in the hands of local public-health officials in the United States. They generated these reports, but they hadn't been given the tools or the authority to act on them directly. Because these officials remain outside the American health-care system, they had to beg providers to respond with adequate testing and vaccination. When that proved insufficient, they were forced to launch their own operations, such as drive-through testing sites and stadium vaccination clinics—and they had to do so from scratch, in a mad rush. The operations were all too delayed and temporary. Here, Amador could see the places with the greatest need and deploy doctors, nurses, and community-health workers to do testing and vaccination. Amid COVID, Costa Rica had demonstrated yet again how primary-care leaders could make health happen.

The results are enviable. Since the development of the EBAIS system, deaths from communicable diseases have fallen by ninety-four per cent, and decisive progress has been made against non-communicable diseases as well. It's not just that Costa Rica has surpassed America's life expectancy while spending less on health care as a percentage of income; it actually spends less than the world average. The biggest gain these days is in the middle years of life. For people between fifteen and sixty years of age, the mortality rate in Costa Rica is 8.7 per cent, versus 11.2 per cent in the U.S.—a thirty-per-cent difference. But older people do better, too: in Costa Rica, the average sixty-year-old survives another 24.2 years, compared with 23.6 years in the U.S.

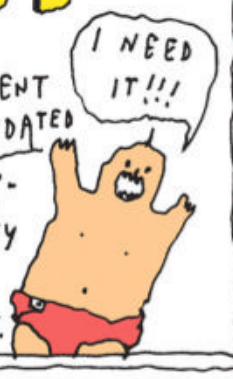
The concern with the U.S. health system has never been about what it is capable of achieving at its best. It is about the large disparities we tolerate. Higher income, in particular, is associated with much longer life. In a 2016 study, the Harvard economist Raj Chetty and his research team found that the difference in life expectancy between forty-year-olds in the top one per cent of American income distribution and in the bottom one per cent is fifteen years for men and ten years for women.

But the team also found that where people live in America can make a big difference in how their income affects their longevity. Forty-year-olds who are in the lowest quarter of income distribution—making up to about thirty-five thousand dollars a year—live four years longer in New York City than in Las Vegas, Indianapolis, or Oklahoma City. For the top one per cent, place matters far less.

In a way, it's a hopeful finding: if being working class shortens your life less in some places than in others, then evidently it's possible to spread around some of the advantages that come with higher income. Chetty's work didn't say how, but it contained some clues. The geographic differences in mortality for people at lower socioeconomic levels were primarily due to increased disease rather than to increased injury. So healthier behaviors—reflected in local rates of obesity, smoking, and exercise—made a big difference for low earners, as did the quality of local hospital care. Chetty also found that low-income individuals tended to live longest, and have healthier behaviors, in cities with highly educated populations and high incomes. The local level of inequality, or the rates at which people

15 MUST-HAVES for BABY™

A COMICALLY TINY & INSUFFICIENT EXCERPT FROM THE NEWLY UPDATED MUST-BUY BOOK "9,000 MUST-HAVES FOR BABY," BY HARVEY SUGAR, M.D., AND EDIE JOLANTA KENT.



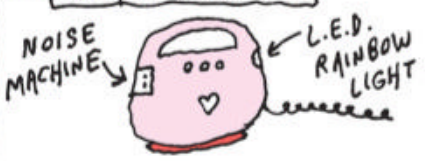
① CRIB

ACTUALLY, YOU DON'T NEED ONE OF THESE UNTIL YOUR BABY IS FULLY READY TO WITHDRAW FROM HER "EXTRA TRIMESTER™," SO MAYBE NEVER. BUT BUY ONE ANYWAY, PREFERABLY A HIGH-END DANISH ONE IN A LIGHT COLOR.

② WEARABLE EXTERNAL WOMB™

THIS DAMP, DARK, SILK-AND-RUBBER POD IS DESIGNED TO MAKE BABY'S LIFE AS COMFY AND WORRY-FREE AS IT WAS IN YOUR SURPRISINGLY VERSATILE WOMB! ELECTROMAGNETIC FORCES WILL SOOTHE AND ROCK YOUR BABY FOR AS LONG AS HE DESIRES TO SEQUESTER HIMSELF FROM THE COLD, CRUEL WORLD. CAN BE WORN DAY AND NIGHT—AS LONG AS YOU SLEEP STANDING UP.

③ BREAST PUMP #1

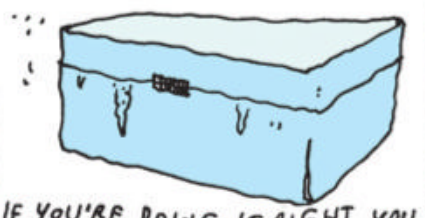


DID YOU KNOW THE BREAST IS THE ULTIMATE HIGH-TECH GADGET?! NOT ONLY IS BREAST MILK DELICIOUS—AND NUTRITIOUS—IT'S ALSO CONVENIENT, AND FREE! SAY GOODBYE TO THOSE PESKY, BANK-BREAKING TRIPS TO THE STORE FOR FACTORY-MADE FORMULA. YOU HAVE IT ALL RIGHT HERE! ALL IT TAKES IS AN IRON WILL (DON'T LET ANYONE TELL YOU YOUR BODY CAN'T PRODUCE ENOUGH MILK!) AND A 24/7 COMMITMENT OF MIND AND BODY: THE PERFECT GIFT FOR BABY! THIS IS A GOOD BREAST PUMP TO OCCUPY YOU BETWEEN HER FREQUENT FEEDINGS.

④ BREAST PUMP #2

THAT SAID, YOU'LL ALSO WANT A MORE HIGH-TECH BREAST PUMP FOR THE OTHER, TRICKIER BREAST—AND A SMALL, STEALTHY BREAST PUMP FOR STUFFING INSIDE YOUR PUMPING BRA™ DURING PARTIES OR MEETINGS.

⑤ BREAST-MILK FREEZER



IF YOU'RE DOING IT RIGHT, YOU WILL PRODUCE MORE MILK THAN YOUR PALTRY HOME FREEZER CAN CONTAIN. SO YOU'LL NEED AT LEAST ONE OF THESE. INTERNAL STORAGE AND LABELLING SYSTEMS SOLD SEPARATELY.

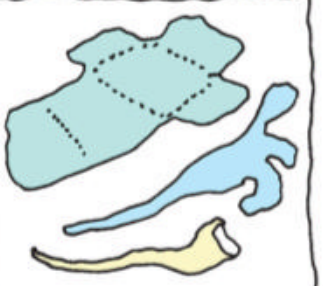
⑥ STROLLER

WAIT. HAVE YOU READ THE WRITINGS OF 19TH-CENTURY FRENCH STROLLER EXPERT BÉBÉ FLANEUR?? UNTIL YOU DO, ANYTHING WE SAY ON THIS SUBJECT WILL BE LOST ON YOU. (BUT HINT: YOU'LL WANT A VERY LARGE ONE.)

⑦ CAR SEAT

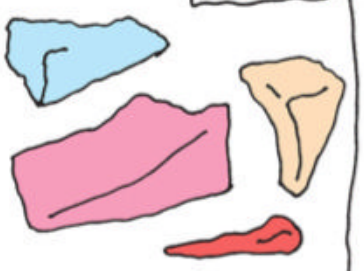
SO, THERE ARE TWO KINDS OF CAR SEAT. ONE FOR COOL BABIES, ONE FOR PLEBES. WHICHEVER KIND YOU OPT FOR, YOU'LL WANT ONE THAT IS BRAND NEW—AND WE MEAN NEVER BEFORE TOUCHED BY HUMAN HANDS. YOU'LL PROBABLY ALSO WANT ONE THAT CAN SNAP ONTO A CAMEL OR OTHER PACK ANIMAL, FOR EASY DESERT TRAVEL.

⑧ INFANT INSERTS FOR STROLLER, CAR SEAT(S), AND WEARABLE EXTERNAL WOMB™



*HARDWARE FOR ATTACHING INFANT INSERTS SOLD SEPARATELY.

⑨ VARIOUS WEDGE-SHAPED PILLOWS

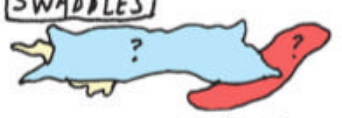


YOU CAN'T HAVE TOO MANY OF THESE! WHY? OH, HA HA HA, IF YOU HAVE TO ASK, YOU'RE IN FOR A BIG SURPRISE...

⑩ BLANKETS

P.S.A.: BLANKETS ARE NO LONGER RECOMMENDED FOR USE ON BABIES. STILL, YOU'LL WANT TO AMASS AT LEAST 19 OR 20 OF THEM, IN CASE THE DATA REVERSES ITSELF.

⑪ SWADDLES



NOW YOU'RE TALKING. SWADDLES ARE DIFFERENT FROM BLANKETS, BUT IN WAYS WE'D RATHER KEEP SHROUDED—OR SWADDLED, IF YOU WILL—IN MYSTERY. THERE ARE MANY KINDS OF SWADDLE. YOU'LL WANT TO BUY AN ARRAY OF THEM, THEN HIRE A PSYCHIC TO HELP DETERMINE WHICH TO KEEP.

⑫, ⑬ & ⑭ AN ELEVATOR, A WASHING MACHINE, AND PERHAPS AN EXTRA ROOM OR TWO

SINCE YOUR LANDLORD PROBABLY WON'T SMILE UPON YOUR SNEAKING THESE AMENITIES INTO YOUR CURRENT RESIDENCE, YOU MIGHT WANT TO CONSIDER MOVING—RIGHT NOW!!! BE SURE TO HAVE PLENTY OF MONEY ON HAND.

⑮ DOULA

THESE MYSTICAL CREATURES ARE NOT JUST FOR HELPING YOU GIVE BIRTH. YOU SHOULD ALSO HAVE ONE POP IN ON YOU AT VARIOUS ODD HOURS THROUGHOUT YOUR BABY'S DEVELOPMENT. THE PROBLEM IS: HOW TO FIND A GOOD ONE? HINT: THE BEST DOULAS SUBSIST MOSTLY ON NECTAR AND RAW HONEY. TRAPS START AT $999.99.

SO YOU DON'T MISS ANYTHING IMPORTANT, BE SURE TO BUY THE BOOK! WE RECOMMEND THAT YOU GET AT LEAST TWO COPIES.

were unemployed or uninsured, didn't appear to matter much. What did seem to help was a higher level of local government expenditures.

The Costa Rica model suggests that directing those expenditures wisely—in ways attentive to the greatest opportunities for impact—can be transformative when it comes to the less connected and the less advantaged. In an ingenious study, a group of Stanford economists compared families that include a doctor or a nurse with those that do not. The study focussed on Sweden, where, for many years, medical schools used a lottery to select among equally qualified applicants, providing the researchers with a set of otherwise matched families. The study found that people with a medically trained relative were ten per cent more likely to live beyond the age of eighty. Younger relatives were more likely to be vaccinated, were less likely to have drug or alcohol addiction, and had fewer hospital admissions. Older relatives had a lower rate of chronic illnesses such as heart disease. The study even found a "dose response" pattern: the closer that relatives lived to the family health professional, and the closer on the family tree, the larger the benefit. Relationships with people who can supply beneficial knowledge, authority, norms, and encouragement appear to make a major difference in mortality.

There's no public-health initiative that will add a doctor to your family, but Costa Rica shows that we can provide something close: a primary-care team whom individuals know personally and can call upon in the course of their lives. The country has reduced premature mortality at all income levels, but the largest declines have been at the lower end. In fact, by 2012 Costa Rica had largely eliminated disparities in infant mortality based on how much money families have or where they live. (In the U.S., babies born in high-poverty counties are almost twice as likely to die in their first year of life as those born in low-poverty counties—and it's a similar story for those born in rural instead of suburban areas.)

Other countries, including Sri Lanka and Colombia, have taken notice, and begun adopting key elements of the Costa Rica model. There's no reason a U.S. city or state couldn't do so, too. As the pandemic ebbs, countries will be assessing what went wrong with their public-health systems. A fundamental failure has been the separation of public health from health-care delivery. Getting that right, across the globe, could present our greatest opportunity to secure longer and better lives.

What would this model look like in the United States? Consider the example of one common illness, viral hepatitis. Infection with either the hepatitis-B or the hepatitis-C virus can lead to severe liver damage and to chronic liver disease—a top-five cause of death for Americans between the ages of forty-five and sixty-four. It can also lead to liver cancer. More than four million people in the U.S. have a chronic hepatitis-B or hepatitis-C infection. Hepatitis C alone is the most common reason that American patients require liver transplants. We spend billions of dollars a year on treatment for these two viruses.

I know the damage that viral hepatitis can do. My aunt, a former family physician in the Washington, D.C., area, slowly died from liver failure after contracting hepatitis B through an accidental needle stick in the nineteen-eighties. Today, we have an effective vaccine against hepatitis B, and hepatitis C has become curable with oral medications. If we had a system that let us expand screening, treatment, and vaccination, we could eliminate these diseases. Indeed, in 2017 the Department of Health and Human Services set that as a goal.

But here again our system is designed for the great breakthrough, not the great follow-through. In Costa Rica, nearly ninety per cent of babies are vaccinated against hepatitis B at birth. (Mother-to-child transmission during childbirth is a significant pathway for infection.) In the U.S., only two-thirds are. Just twenty-five per cent of American adults are vaccinated against the virus. Our chronic-liver-disease rates have barely budged. In the meantime, new hepatitis-C infections have increased by almost thirty per cent since 2017. If every community had a primary-care team able to provide visits to all residents, we'd have a way to see that everyone had been offered vaccination and other preventive measures, screening for viral hepatitis, and prompt treatment for those found to have it. Viral hepatitis is markedly higher among immigrant Asian residents, African Americans, the poor, and intravenous drug users—precisely the people who have had the greatest difficulty in gaining access to medical care and advice.

We know what needs to be done; we just don't have the mechanisms to

do it. Yet we've had glimpses of what we can accomplish with the right system in place. In the nineteen-nineties, the U.S. government launched a national effort to offer hepatitis-B vaccinations to all hospital workers, and, by the middle of the decade, two-thirds of them had got the jab; infections in this population were reduced by a remarkable ninety-eight per cent, from seventeen thousand cases in 1983 to just four hundred in 1995. How? Our hospital systems have dedicated personnel who get in touch with each of their employees at least once a year and offer them essential preventive care, including vaccinations, without charge. Yet those systems aren't equipped to do the same for the people in the communities they serve. Costa Rica shows how they could be.

"You have to come to this place with me," Salas said on my last day in Costa Rica. I'd been hoping to spend more time in the clinic with the primary-care doctors, and wasn't pleased that he'd decided on a visit to another coffee town—Palmares, a half hour's drive from Atenas through the mountains.

"What's there?" I asked.

"A dental program," he said. Responding to my skeptical look, he went on, "I've heard such good things about it. We will go." He was still, decades on, a persuasive man.

We arrived at the parking lot of a coffee-processing plant, and found a powder-blue bus with a big cartoon molar and a fat loop of cartoon floss on the door. On the side, in big block letters, it said, "¡JUNTOS CONSTRUIMOS SONRISAS!"—"Together we build smiles!" I was greeted by Alejandra Rodríguez, a white-coated dentist, who told me that the bus was donated by Chick-fil-A, which gets coffee beans from the Palmares plant. Inside, the bus was outfitted with three dental chairs, an X-ray machine, and enough supplies to provide dental cleanings and treatment for all the schoolchildren in the community.

Dental care was not a significant part of the EBAIS structure that Salas helped design. But its systemic approach took root more widely. As Rodríguez explained to me, members of her profession helped lead an effort, starting in the nineteen-eighties, to institute after-lunch toothbrushing in elementary schools. Toothbrushes were provided for every student; rows of sinks were installed at schools, so that groups of children could brush at the same time. The program insured that all schoolchildren brushed their teeth at least once a day. The effort began in and around Palmares, and soon the idea was implemented across the country. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Health required that table salt be fluoridated—an easier way to introduce fluoride on a national scale than fluoridating every town's water supply.

The results of such measures have been dramatic. In 1980, Costa Ricans averaged more than nine teeth decayed, missing, or filled by the age of twelve. By 2002, the number was below two. Today, it is below one—results as good as America's or better, at a fraction of our costs.

Rodríguez wanted to show us the new program she's leading. Throughout the school year, the blue bus visits all nine elementary schools in Palmares, providing cleanings and treatment for every child whose parents permit it. On board, Salas and I saw a skinny sixth-grade boy have his teeth cleaned and get a sealant applied to his molars.

Costa Ricans, it now struck me, had some of the best teeth I'd seen anywhere in my travels. Rodríguez and her partners were showing how dental care could

be improved even further. They were integrating public health and individualized care—creating an actual health system—even in dentistry.

"It is possible to change the picture," Salas said to me afterward, reflecting on our visits inside the system he'd helped create so long ago. "It is possible to call upon a group of people, a group of Quixotes—do you know Quixote?—who think and can see twenty years, thirty years ahead. It is possible to raise an idea and see it supported by a younger generation to become real."

Public health can be a bulwark against the cynicism that public institutions sometimes inspire. Yet acceptance, Salas knew, always has to be earned. He recalled how anxious his grandmother was when the government first instituted a social-security contribution. "Because for the first time she had to pay something for the workers," he said. "I remember she said to us, 'The coffee harvest is good but not so good as to have money to pay workers now for social security.'" Every step is hard-fought.

When Salas and I had walked through the cemetery, shortly after my arrival in Atenas, we'd stopped at his family plot, among the oldest there. His great-grandfather Guillermo, who died at forty-five, in 1894, and his great-grandmother Avelina, who died at sixty-five, in 1925, were buried there. In the next generation, his grandfather Emilio also died young, at forty-six, in 1931. Death seemed to take family members at random. His grandmother Guillerma lived to ninety-seven, but two of her children had died in infancy—one at sixteen months, from a respiratory illness that Salas suspected was whooping cough, and the other at twenty-four months, from diarrhea. In 1986, Salas buried his father, Emilio Salas Villalobos, in the plot, after his death, from colon cancer, at the age of seventy-four. In 2001, he buried his mother, Sara Chaves Villalobos, who also died at seventy-four, from a heart attack.

I noticed that his mother's name wasn't on the family grave marker, and I asked him why.

"I am responsible for not including my mother's name and date," he told me. "Possibly, I am waiting for the opportunity for writing our names and dates together, and forever." Álvaro Salas Chaves is seventy years old now, and he imagines he might be joining her soon.

But, owing to a health system he helped build, the average Costa Rican his age will live at least another sixteen years. Salas is sturdy, with no serious illnesses. Still, when the time comes, he intends to be buried in the same plot.

"Because all of my family are here," he explained. "They are all around. We will have a big meeting here." ♦

THE C.E.O. OF "SUCCESSION"

The writer who keeps the billionaire Roys trapped in their gilded cage.

BY REBECCA MEAD

When Jesse Armstrong, the writer and creator of the HBO series "Succession," arrived on set at Amerigo Vespucci Airport, in Florence, one morning in June, he was faced with an extravagant decision. The scene to be shot was from the first episode of Season 3, in which various members of the Roy family—the dysfunctional media dynasty whose power struggles the show acidly chronicles—have just disembarked from the yacht on which, in the Season 2 finale, they bobbed in gilded captivity. Two planes had been positioned together on the tarmac: a Boeing 737, rented at a price of more than a hundred thousand dollars, and a smaller Falcon business jet. Tracks had been laid for a dolly shot. The temperature was already climbing into the eighties, and a crew of more than two hundred people bustled about the runway, perspiring in high-visibility vests.

The scene hinged on a surprise. In the final moments of the previous episode, Logan Roy, the volatile patriarch, was aboard the yacht, watching a live stream of Kendall Roy, one of his four ambitious offspring, at a press conference in New York, where he had been sent to publicly shoulder the consequences of a scandal in the cruise-ship division of Waystar Royco, the family conglomerate. Instead of offering himself up as a sacrifice, however, Kendall had stuck the knife into his father. The new season, which begins airing in October, picks up the story moments later, with Logan, the rest of the family, and Logan's most loyal executives still in Europe, calculating how to counter Kendall's move.

"It's a moment of indecision," Armstrong said of the tarmac scene, above the drone of idling jet engines. Though the previous season ended with a closeup of an inscrutable smile on Logan's face, "this is the moment at which you get the sense that Logan is worried." In the new script, Logan chooses to divide his forces into two camps: one party will return to America while he and others fly elsewhere. Armstrong's decision that morning involved the placement of the two rented planes, which airport staff had parked close together. As he put it to me, his concern was that having two planes visible at the outset of the scene would preëmpt the story: "I think a viewer's sense would be: 'They can all travel together on the big plane. So why is there a *second* plane?'"

An embarrassment of airplanes: a very "Succession" problem. The show, a word-of-mouth hit, is known for its faithful depiction of the bountiful resources and anesthetized habits of the very wealthy. On an excursion from the yacht in Croatia, Logan's son-in-law, Tom Wambsgans, instructs the pilot of a small boat, "Next cove, please, Julius," so that he and his wife, Shiv, can be ferried to a sublime coastal spot for the unhappiest picnic ever. Armstrong—whose display of personal indulgence, in spite of his professional success, so far extends only to showing up to the Season 3 writers' room in an extremely nice blue cashmere sweater—is a good-natured stickler for verisimilitude. The playwright Lucy Prebble, who is one of the show's writers, recalls "someone coming in and saying, 'We *can't* have two helicopters,' and noting how many tens of thousands of dollars they cost, and Jesse just saying, in a really relaxed way, 'I think we probably need two.'" "Succession" documents wealth but it does not fetishize it, with the possible exception of a backless wool turtleneck dress worn by Shiv in an episode of Season 2; the garment was so delectably impractical that it inspired a flurry of online shopping. In general, the show makes affluence look vaguely diseased, and emphasizes the ways in which even the very rich cannot be entirely insulated from the drudgery of inconvenience. Mark Mylod, who has directed close to half the episodes of "Succession," and is also an executive producer, told me, "We try to find situations where the characters cannot control the world, whether the weather's bad or they are stuck in traffic." For last season's finale, Mylod filmed scenes on the yacht in the middle of the day, beneath harsh, overhead sunlight, in order to make the characters seem uncomfortably exposed, physically and emotionally. When, in the same episode, Logan is obliged to conduct a humbling video call with one of his corporation's major shareholders, it is not from the comfort of his Audi but, rather, from the grim patio of a service station on a busy highway.

At the Florence terminal, the drawbacks of private plane travel—being ferried in cramped vans to wait on a scorching, gritty, noisy airport apron, as opposed to sharing a large, air-conditioned terminal with commercial passengers—were identical to the drawbacks of shooting high-end television in an inhospitable location. The actors clutched their scripts while members of the hair-and-makeup team attended to them, attempting to keep sweat and grime in abeyance. Will Tracy and Tony Roche, two of the show's writers, hid under a small awning, using their phones to read Armstrong's script for a forthcoming episode. Given the prevailing discomfort, Armstrong had to weigh how much of a disruption it was going to be creatively, physically, and emotionally to preserve the revelation of a second plane. In consultation with Mylod, who was directing the episode, a decision was reached not to compromise narrative integrity: the Falcon would be towed out of sight. To Armstrong's relief, a driver on a small white tug had removed the offending plane within fifteen minutes. "I thought it was going to be a huge deal to move a

Armstrong says of the Roys, "To be excluded from the flame of money and power, I think, would feel a bit like death."

PHOTOGRAPH BY PARI DUKOVIC

"It's my husband. He's on jury duty and he's not allowed to talk about the case. But here's the thing—I really want to know."

• •

plane," Armstrong told me, once the Falcon had been shunted aside. He sounded amused, even a little wondering. "But, luckily, it took just one little man."

The table read of the pilot episode of "Succession" took place in Manhattan on November 8, 2016: Election Day. That evening, the cast and the rest of the team gathered at the home of Adam McKay—an executive producer of the show, and the director of the pilot—for a party that was expected to celebrate the victory of Hillary Clinton. Matthew Macfadyen, the British actor who plays Tom Wambsgans, told me, "We watched the results come in, and everyone wandered off into the night—good for storytelling, bad for humanity." Armstrong's most significant memory of the occasion was how quickly attendees accommodated to what initially seemed to be earth-shattering news. "It was such a shock—then five, ten minutes later, everyone's living in a new reality," he said. Even in calamity, he observed, many people are "quite oriented towards how it affects them, and what they will do next."

The first episodes of "Succession," which aired in the summer of 2018, established an elliptical relationship to contemporary reality: there would be no specific references to Trump. But, with the U.S. government turned over to a leader with a transparently chaotic, transactional, and rapacious nature, the show met the national mood. "Succession" would have been equally entertaining had Hillary Clinton become President, but it wouldn't have felt so timely if it hadn't appeared after the election of Trump—a candidacy championed by Fox News, whose core strategy of chasing ratings by spreading fear is not dissimilar to that of ATN, the news organization owned by Waystar Royco. The opening credit sequence of "Succession" includes a cheeky shot of an ATN news ticker; in Season 2, it reads, "GENDER FLUID ILLEGALS MAY BE ENTERING THE COUNTRY 'TWICE.'"

For some viewers, Armstrong's thoroughgoing commitment to a curdled view of humanity—as the Roys jockey for position, they trade such endearments as "the cunt of Monte Cristo"—made the show at once intolerable and irresistible. "I HATE EVERYONE ON 'SUCCESSION' AND I CAN'T STOP WATCHING," a typical headline read. The show is so unsettling, in part, because it offers no vantage points exterior to its scrupulously rendered universe—there is no outsider figure who is easier to identify with than the amoral protagonists. The Roy family's outsider, Cousin Greg, is as calculating as any member of the clan with whom he seeks to ingratiate himself. Culture critics have popularized the term "wealth porn" to characterize shows, such as "Billions" or "Gossip Girl," that lavish attention on the consumption habits of the absurdly wealthy. But, if the shiny surface of "Succession" bears a relation to pornography, it is less because it titillates than because it partakes of pornography's deadening relentlessness.

"Succession" also withholds cheap catharsis. Kendall's backsliding with drugs is only the most overt example of the show's gothic sensibility: all the Roys have been poisoned by the toxic nature of the family fortune, and Armstrong refuses to impose on them the kind of artificial personal growth that fosters an easy bond with the audience. The closest that "Succession" has come to giving its characters a respite from their crabbed emotional confinement is when Kendall, at a particularly low ebb, begs Shiv for a hug. She awkwardly complies, but only after saying in astonishment, "Give you a *hug*?"

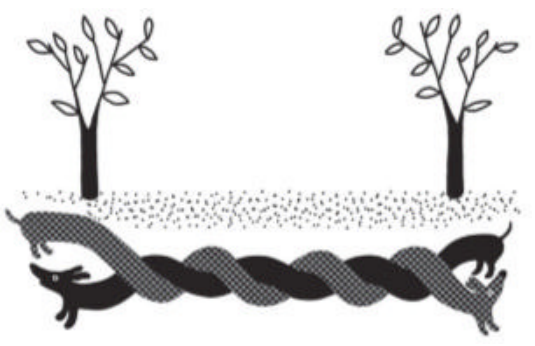
Given the care that Armstrong puts into making "Succession" a complex viewing experience, he is reluctant to explicate the show too much, as if it were reducible to a tidy set of themes and intentions. Nevertheless, his ambitions in "Succession" are driven not by a voyeuristic fascination with the rich—or by a righteous desire to expose the perfidies of inequity—but by a wish to tell, through the specific medium of a contemporary media dynasty, a more universal story about power and family relations, and to show how those forces can torque an individual's humanity. It's not so much "Billions" as "Buddenbrooks," with more money and less grain. In one of a series of conversations during the making of Season 3, Armstrong told me, "One of the things that strikes me when I've read about these families—whether it be the Max-

wells or the Redstones or the Julio-Claudians—is that, when you get that combination of money, power, and family relations, things get so complicated that you can justify actions to yourself that are pretty unhealthy to your well-being as a human being. Or you don't even need to justify them, because the actions are baked into your being." The infighting can become so darkly satisfying that it consumes one's life: "For people who come from powerful families, there is nothing in life quite as interesting as being at court." Indeed, almost nobody in a rich family steps away from the drama. "For these people to be excluded from the flame of money and power, I think, would feel a bit like death," Armstrong said.

Armstrong's interest in how human beings work—in what they say, and what they leave unsaid—is combined with a gift for comic dialogue that bounces from the demotic to the lewd to the baroque. Upon arriving at the family's Hamptons estate, Logan demands that the doors be opened, noting, "It smells like the cheesemonger died and left his dick in the Brie." When Cousin Greg is grilled at a congressional hearing, he responds to one question by saying, "Uh, if it is to be said, so it be, so it is"—a tortured circumvention of "Yes." The uneasy simultaneity of comedy and drama that "Succession" depends on is a consequence of Armstrong's unwillingness to save his characters from themselves. The writer and director Chris Morris, on whose recent movie "The Day Shall Come" Armstrong worked as a writer, told me, "Each of the characters in 'Succession' gives you the capacity to hope that they might snap out of the trap of their own existence. Jesse is the perfect sadist, because he is horrible to each one in turn, and yet he offers the audience just enough to hope that the characters might this time not disgrace themselves in the way that we kind of know they will. It is basically like a cat playing with a mouse and not killing it."

A certain pitilessness, Armstrong told me, is not a bad thing for a work of fiction to have. "How can you be true about human beings?" he said. "That is a preoccupation." He went on, "Without getting too highfalutin, there's that quote from Marx, in 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,' where he says men and women make their own history, but not the circumstances of their own making." (The original text is less taut: "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.") Armstrong continued, "For me, a lot of the art and the work of the show is in that territory between what's history in the broadest sense, what's family history, what's tradition, and what's the room for one's own choices, and your own making of your life and your world. And there's a gap there, which that mysterious thing about human personality fills."

Whether Armstrong is on set at one of the foreign locales that give "Succession" its glossy atmosphere of sterile, moneyed internationalism or at Silvercup Studios in Queens—where the set of Logan Roy's Fifth Avenue apartment, modelled on the mansion owned by the Council on Foreign Relations, is maintained—he is "like the mayor of a small town," Jon Brown, a writer for the show, told me. Brown recalled, "I was in his office one day, and he was trying to write an episode, and someone came in and said, 'Jesse, the caterers have made an ice sculpture, and they would like you to come and look at it,' and Jesse had to put his episode



down to go and look at it. He has these civic duties to keep everyone happy."

When Armstrong is not issuing the equivalent of mayoral proclamations, he works in a rented room in a converted department store in Brixton, a neighborhood in South London. The office is spacious and airy but modestly equipped, with a wall of bookshelves and a teakettle on a side table. He keeps a carton of milk on the window ledge outside, like a student. "It feels a bit profligate having a whole fridge just for one pint of milk," he said when I visited. His desk faces a window that overlooks a commuter railway. When I remarked that the clatter of passing trains must distract him, Armstrong looked surprised, as if he'd never noticed it before. "If you'd asked me if I could hear the trains from my office, I would have told you, 'I don't think so,'" he said. "I'd be a terrible—or brilliant—estate agent."

Armstrong, who is fifty, has a scruff of salt-and-pepper beard that comes and goes, intelligent brown eyes that he often closes in concentration when speaking, and a measured voice that is lightly inflected with the accent of Shropshire, in the West Midlands, where he grew up. He is as affable as the characters on "Succession" are disagreeable. Prestige TV is prime territory for assholery, and the writers' rooms of some of the best shows of recent decades have been arenas for conflict. Matthew Weiner, the creator of "Mad Men," was called "an emotional terrorist" by a former writer on the show. ("I was a very demanding boss," he later told the New York *Times*.) When Aaron Sorkin, the creator of "The West Wing," was accused of yelling at a female writer on his HBO series "The Newsroom," he responded that writers'-room arguments are "not only common, they are encouraged."

This is not Armstrong's style: he prefers to engender creativity with stability. "I've never seen him lose his temper," Jon Brown told me. The show employs ten staff writers, half of them British and half American, and, unusually for a comedy, there is a roughly equal proportion of men to women. Even when the show has been in production and Armstrong, in addition to his other duties, has been writing the final two episodes of the season, he has remained equanimous. Brown recalled, "When we were in Scotland filming last season, there was a time when he asked me and Tony Roche to stop talking, so he could concentrate. Me and Tony were, like, 'Fucking hell, *someone's* grumpy.' And then, in an hour, Jesse was, like, 'You can talk again.'"

Francesca Gardiner, one of the writers of Season 3, said of her boss, "He's sort of cool-dorky." Armstrong bakes. He's been a vegetarian—with occasional

excursions into fish—since his youth. He met his wife, who works for the National Health Service, when they were in college, at the University of Manchester. They have two children and have lived in the same unflashy part of South London for almost three decades. When I asked if he had plans to upgrade his domestic space, he said, "We might do a new kitchen. So that will be corrupting." Jeremy Strong, who plays Kendall Roy, told me, "I think it was Flaubert who said, 'I want to live the quiet, ordered life of the bourgeoisie so that I can be violent and original in my work.' That's Jesse."

Meticulous research goes into making "Succession" feel true to the rarefied world it portrays. What kind of overcoat would Logan Roy wear? A trick question: a mogul being perpetually shuttled from corner suite to climate-controlled limousine to luxury apartment doesn't need an overcoat, no matter how cold it gets. Each of the staff writers is tasked with exploring a different dimension of the "Succession" world—which is, Armstrong acknowledges, overwhelmingly white and privileged. "We are working to reflect the world as it is, and not as we would wish it to be," he said. "There's another sort of show in which edging the world a bit towards what one would want it to be doesn't hurt the show at all, whereas our show is critical-satirical—we need to portray that very particular and very powerful bit of the world it is concerned with quite precisely." Last season, it fell to Susan Soon He Stanton to conduct an inquiry into the ministrations provided by the staff of a luxury yacht. She reported back that attendants wipe specks of powder from the rim of a guest's makeup compact and print out copies of the daily newspapers every morning, as if they had been freshly fetched from a terrestrial newsstand. Jon Brown took a deep, if not hands-on, dive into the kind of élite sex club that serves as the setting for Tom Wambsgans's bachelor party in Season 1. In an early draft of the scene, Brown incorporated an incident that he'd learned about during his investigations, in which an orgy room's music speakers failed, making the slapping sound of flesh on flesh wetly audible. "After about one second, someone shouted, 'Put the fucking music on,' because even they didn't want to hear how disgusting it was," he told me. Armstrong decided to spare Tom that particular degradation, perhaps because he would soon put him through a humiliation that deliberately echoes the kind of sadistic jokes Josef Stalin used to play on party guests. At a dinner at a corporate retreat in Hungary, Logan, determined to stop leaks to the press, invents Boar on the Floor, a game in which executives suspected of betrayal are forced to crawl and chase sausages on the parquetry. "No half-hearted oink!" he demands.

"Surrender, Catwoman—your nefarious plan to flood the secret worldwide web of computers with pictures of cats will never work."

As background for "Succession," Armstrong and his writers loyally read the *Financial Times,* and they have plowed through a library's worth of media biographies. They took a close look at "Crime and Punishment," in order to deepen their depiction of Kendall's inner turmoil, and consulted histories of ancient Rome in the hope that understanding the relationship between Nero and his freedman Sporus—whom the Emperor commanded be castrated, before undergoing a sham marriage ceremony with him—might illuminate the dynamic between Tom and Cousin Greg. The show has also hired such literary consultants as Gary Shteyngart, the novelist whose 2018 book, "Lake Success," also depicts the lives of the super-rich in New York; among other things, Shteyngart discussed with the "Succession" team the delusionary psychology of hedge funders who are convinced that their wealth will protect them from the consequences of climate change. Tom Holland, the author of wide-lens books about ancient and medieval history, spoke about Caligula and other dissolute Roman leaders.

Last year, Brown told me, Armstrong came into the writers' room with a big notion about the Epic of Gilgamesh. "I am fucked if I have any idea what the Epic of Gilgamesh is," Brown said. "But if it makes you feel like you deserve your Emmy a little more, knock yourself out." Armstrong assured me, "I have not *read* the Epic of Gilgamesh. I have probably listened to an 'In Our Time' podcast about it." This lapse notwithstanding, Armstrong is a serious reader. Once, when I asked him which books he'd read recently, he mentioned the memoirs of Jack Straw, the Labour

Party politician who served as a Member of Parliament and as Lord Chancellor; Robert Draper's book about the run-up to the Iraq War; "A Little History of Poetry," by John Carey; and the short stories of Jean Stafford.

Armstrong is disciplined not only in his reading. At the outset of writing Season 3, he started taking early-morning swims at Brockwell Lido, an unheated outdoor pool in London; as winter closed in, he updated his collaborators with slightly smug daily reports about the increasingly frigid water temperatures. Certain aspects of Armstrong's work habits suggest a need to exert control. In the fall of 2019, the writers' room for Season 3 was set up in a modern office building in Victoria. Dismayed to discover that he could not personally adjust the thermostat, Armstrong drew a picture of one set to 21.5°C—about 70°F—and put it on the wall. "You are meant to have a slightly cooler room for comedy," he told me. "Standups always like the room cold, and if you're shooting a sitcom live you want it a little bit chilly for the audience. I don't know why—you'd have to ask a combination of an evolutionary psychologist and a building-maintenance man." The room in Victoria also lacked a clock, and so, on a whiteboard featuring charts denoting each character's development episode by episode, Armstrong drew a clock set to 2:25 P.M. It's a hopeful time of day for a TV writer, he told me, since the room officially wraps up at 3:30 P.M.: "It's almost there—not painful, watch-checking time, but nice to be toward the end of the day."

When the show is in development, Armstrong's preferred practice is to begin the day with each writer, in turn, giving an account of what she or he did the previous night, a process that can last as long as an hour. Will Tracy told me, "We go round the room clockwise, and everyone says what they ate for dinner, what bad movie they watched on TV, how much sleep they got—the more mundane, the funnier and better. At first, I thought this was very odd, but I immediately noticed that it bonded the writers—we developed a kind of group rapport very quickly." Tracy went on, "And then all kinds of stuff from those evening recaps weaseled their way into the show. Someone will mention something about a friend who lived on Staten Island and had to commute into New York, and all of a sudden there's a little line in the script about how Greg is living on Staten Island, and he's coming in on the ferry every day and it's a nightmare." (A sneer from Tom: "Dude, why stop at the ferry? Just come in from Cleveland on the Greyhound.")

Personal preoccupations, or nuggets of family history, find their way into the scripts, along with the writers' research. The unfolding disaster of "Sands"—the dreadful play written by Willa Ferreyra, the girlfriend of Logan's eldest son, Connor Roy—is informed by Armstrong's impatience with the experience of theatregoing. "I am almost phobic about fearing that I am going to be bored, and in the theatre it's a bit rude to leave, so I find that increases my anxiety about being bored to high levels," he told me. The story line is enhanced by the presence in the writers' room of some acclaimed playwrights, including Lucy Prebble and Susan Soon He Stanton. When, in an episode partially written by Stanton, Shiv meets Logan for a post-theatre supper and asks him how he enjoyed the play, his weary reply is "You know—people pretending to be people."

When I visited the writers' room after hours one afternoon in late 2019, I peeked at the whiteboards, along with other visual evidence of the group's creative discussions, such as photocopied images of paintings, by Goya and Rubens, of Saturn devouring his son. There was a chart documenting a group competition to predict the results of the recent U.K. general election, which had secured Boris Johnson's position as the country's Prime Minister (to the dismay of the liberal intelligentsia of London, among other constituencies). The clear winner was Armstrong, who had predicted a Conservative margin of victory far greater than even the most pessimistic of his collaborators thought possible. "One of the privileges of doing a show like this is that you are able to think about the world with some other smart people," he told me. "Do you know that W. H. Auden quote—'Poetry makes nothing happen'? To some extent, poetry can stand in for this kind of work as well. I don't suppose it is going to have any direct influence on the world. But it is still a way of being in it, and feeling like you are part of it, instead of entirely being acted upon."

More than a decade before Armstrong wrote the pilot of "Succession," he was commissioned to write a documentary-style teleplay set at a family dinner party celebrating Rupert Murdoch's eightieth birthday. That project didn't get far off the ground, but it did come to the attention of Frank Rich, the former New York *Times* columnist who is now an HBO producer. That and other Armstrong scripts impressed the network enough to greenlight "Succession," which takes inspiration not only from the Murdoch dynasty but also from other media families, including the Maxwells and the Redstones. Among Armstrong's unmade but most admired projects is a bio-pic of Lee Atwater, the scabrous Republican strategist who helped elect George H. W. Bush to be Ronald Reagan's successor as President. "It's morning in America . . . and I tell you what, I have morning fucking wood," Armstrong's Atwater announces on page 1. Rich described the script to me as "a history of right-wing politics up to that time, with a comic touch," adding, "I couldn't believe this British writer could write such a compelling piece about American politics."

At first glance, it might seem surprising that "Succession"—a show saturated in knowing detail about Manhattan, even if it is concerned with a global corporate business—was conceived by a British showrunner and is the product of a writers' room in London. The Roys, though, have British roots: Logan is from a working-class Scottish background, and the mother of the younger Roy children, Caroline, is a frosty English aristocrat. Armstrong told me that in considering Caroline's class background he had in mind someone like Lady Caroline Blackwood, the author and the daughter of the Marquess of Dufferin and Ava, who was married to both Robert Lowell and Lucian Freud. The barb-trading discourse of the family, and also its aversion to the expression of emotion, are recognizable as culturally inherited

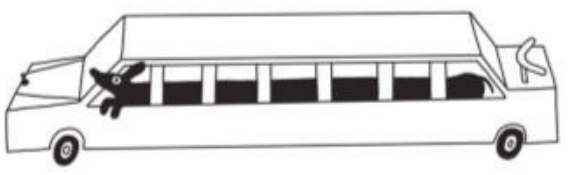
traits. When Kendall visits his mother and tries to confide in her late one night, she recommends that they wait until morning, so they can talk "over an egg," then scarpers before he rises. Brian Cox, who plays Logan—and who, like his character, was born in Dundee, Scotland—has an apartment in London, and when I met him at a café in Primrose Hill he told me, "The show has a kind of Swiftian satire. It's in the vibe of this country."

The "Succession" scripts are peppered with the type of memorably lurid cursing that another British writer, Armando Iannucci, helped make a hallmark of HBO, with "Veep." Armstrong has a rule: an insult "should be at least as expressive of who the character uttering it is as it is eloquent, or ineloquent, about its target." At one point, Kendall warns Stewy, a onetime school friend turned business rival, "I will come to you at night with a razor blade, and I will cut your fucking dick off"; Stewy airily replies, "And then push it up your cunt until poo-poo pops out of my nose hole." But the show's linguistic ingenuity extends well beyond scatology. The characters in "Succession" often employ weirdly original turns of phrase, as if they were generating on the spot the inventive speech of an individual caught between two cultures. When Tom learns that Cousin Greg is driving his grandpa from Canada to New York, he taunts, "Canada? With the health care and the ennui?" When the mischievous Roman Roy returns from a brief corporate posting in the sticks, he gives Logan's butler an almost Falstaffian greeting: "Hail, my fellow toiler man, I have returned from real America, bearing the gift of sight."

Will Tracy told me, "Jesse has a very particular kind of phraseology for the way people speak—even particular obscenities or analogies. The characters will use a kind of dialogue that makes me think, I've never really heard somebody speak that way. But it feels real, and not like a TV writer writing a line of what feels like dialogue." Tracy, who is American, recalled that, when he first heard certain phrases in the writers' room, he assumed that they were Britishisms. "But it turns out they are just Jesse-isms," he said. "Like, he'll say, 'Tom is completely freaking out—he's completely shit his whack.' I said, 'Is that a British thing?' Jesse said yeah, but Tony and Georgia and Jon said *no*. Jesse *thought* that it was a thing." The phrase will be introduced to the lexicon in an upcoming episode.

Armstrong has been interested in America since he was a teen-ager growing up in Oswestry, a market town on the border with Wales. His father, David, was a high-school English teacher who later turned to writing crime fiction; his mother, Julia, worked at nursery schools. Armstrong told me, "Oswestry's a bit in the middle of nowhere—quite tough, and quite English, in the way border towns are." In 2013, he made a short film, "No Kaddish in Carmarthen," centered on Gwyn, a fifteen-year-old Welsh high schooler with a fascination for Woody Allen, who adopts black-rimmed non-prescription glasses and claims to be Jewish. "Mam's a Methodist," Gwyn says. "It's the same thing—it's similar." Armstrong calls the film a "short-story version of an element of my youth." His parents were gently countercultural, in a health-food-and-alternative-energy kind of way; they were also eager to expose Armstrong and his younger sister, who is now a graphic designer, to the world beyond their provincial town, with family trips to Greece and Tunisia.

In the spring of 1990, Armstrong and a friend took a budget trip to New York City, where they crashed on the couch of some Cooper Union students



whom Armstrong had met while backpacking in Europe. "We walked around and had the tops of our heads blown off, just seeing what the city was like," Armstrong told me. Upon returning home, he matriculated at the University of Manchester, ninety minutes northeast of Oswestry. He chose the university partly because it had an excellent American Studies department, and partly because the city had a vibrant cultural scene, with the celebrated Haçienda night club having hosted such bands as the Smiths and New Order. "When I was choosing where to go to university, we used to try to go to the Haçienda, and we were always turned away," Armstrong said. "I felt like if I went to the university I could try more frequently, at least."

As part of his degree, Armstrong spent a year at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Student life there was bracingly political in a way that Manchester at the time was not, and Armstrong contributed to the school's daily newspaper. But rural Massachusetts felt much less sophisticated. "I'd never before seen people carrying around four cans of beer, like they'd captured some amazing trophy," he recalled. He drew on the experience of his year abroad for an unrealized dramatic-comedy script in which two friends—a nerdy white guy from UMass and an affluent Black graduate of Amherst College—pool their resources to buy a cocoa plantation in a fictional African country, planning to make bespoke chocolate for American hipsters.

After college, Armstrong worked for two years in Westminster, London's political district, as an assistant to Doug Henderson, a Member of Parliament and the shadow minister of home affairs for the opposition Labour Party. "We had a weirdly broad brief—everything from the Channel Islands to dangerous dogs to asylum and immigration," Armstrong recalled. He did not take to the corridors of power; at the 1996 Labour Party conference, held in Blackpool, he so dreaded the prospect of schmoozing at parties that he spent his evenings feeding coins into video games at the amusement arcades on the pier. He was less interested in exercising influence and more interested in noting the quirks of those who held it, such as Ann Widdecombe, a right-wing politician whose office had two posters on display: an anti-abortion image of a fetus, and an image of Garfield, the cartoon cat, bearing the legend "If you want to look thinner, hang out with people fatter than you." Armstrong told me, "She didn't mean them to relate to each other, but to see them together was intriguing." Though he

THE GATE OF HORN & THE GATE OF IVORY

Somewhere I read that music was invented to confirm human loneliness.
But from the same source I learned that truth disappears in the telling of it,
and this, spurious as it seemed, since it unwrites what it teaches,
cast doubt on everything else—the same way a mad raving
might come in the same door of the mind as a profound equilibrium,
causing that mathematical proof, though luminous, though true,
to be discarded. And perhaps this is why progress is taking so long.
Too much weight placed on the doors of things, on their beginnings.
How they entered. Why they came. Nothing allowed to
just arrive and sit down, even into the blue district of dreams
nothing immune to this pathological sourcing.
I confess I often used you this way: as a front gate
to the elaborate memory palace I was building,
asking you to stand still as I tried to carve it around us
out of the black granite night of our childhood. This way
every theory, every mood, every image would have to be paraded
through your wide archway first, to see if it was false, before I let it be filed
as something that happened. The shimmers on Boon Lake in the morning
when cartoons were playing. The peanut-butter cups we used to steal
before breakfast. That birch we used to climb, that could not hold us.
You thought I was taking your hand as we fell
but really I needed a coördinate to touch in midair,
to confirm where the ground was.

—*Bessie Golding*

disliked Westminster, the experience helped him as a writer on "The Thick of It," a profane satire of British politics created by Armando Iannucci.

At the University of Manchester, Armstrong had become close friends with Sam Bain, a classmate from a creative-writing course. Bain, a privately educated Londoner, told me that he was interested by Armstrong's quite different background. "He wrote one short story that had a character working on a building site," Bain said. "It took me a while to realize that it was based on his own experience." After Armstrong abandoned politics, he and Bain began regularly collaborating on comedy scripts. Armstrong discovered that having a writing partner was an amenable way to live. "There's this third entity, Bain & Armstrong Industries, so, when you stop work and go home, you feel more like you've gone home from work than you do when you are working solo," Armstrong said. "And you have got somebody who is exactly as interested as you are in your career."

Their first big show, a British reboot of the U.S. sitcom "That '70s Show," was a flop. But in 2003 they had a breakout success as the co-creators and principal writers of "Peep Show," a sitcom about sad-sack flatmates: Mark, a bank-loan officer, and Jeremy, a failed musician. The scripts, instead of featuring snappy dialogue, were anchored by the interior monologues of the two protagonists, from whose perspective scenes were often shot. The show, which ran for nine seasons, is widely considered to be a British comedy classic; Chris Morris told me that Armstrong and Bain became known as "the ultimate word in flawed male psychology." One celebrated episode is predicated on Armstrong's aversion to theatre: Mark is drafted to join Jeremy on a double date to a low-budget play, and they endure the experience as if undergoing a dreadful medical experiment. "When do we get to go out?" Jeremy whispers to Mark as they sit between their dates. Mark, looking crucified, replies, "As far as I can make out, we get to go out for a bit in an hour, and then we have to come back for *two hours*."

Armstrong's background in half-hour comedies can be detected in the economy of the "Succession" scripts, and in the premium the show places on keeping things lively. "I still think a half hour of comedy is the most intensive form of writing you can do," he said. Kieran Culkin, who plays Roman, told me that Armstrong is allergic to shtick: "If it's just a little bit—half an inch—too far-leaning into something, he's going to catch it. On any other show, people would be, like, 'Oh, that's funny, let's do that.' And he'll always be the voice of reason: 'Yes, it's funny, yes, it's great, but it doesn't work.'"

Armstrong rejects the privileging of drama over comedy, and happily calls "Succession" a satire. But the characters are far more complicated individuals than are likely to be found in a sitcom; their stunted interiority is explored with a combination of empathy and dispassion. Such nuance is possible, in no small part, because of the actors playing these roles. Brian Cox is a Shakespeare veteran, as is Sarah Snook, who told me that playing Shiv had helped her understand the role of Cordelia, in "King Lear," rather than the other way around. "I felt like I understood the weight of familial responsibility, and the love and compassion a daughter can have for a father and leader, though he may be difficult," Snook said. Jeremy Strong approaches Kendall with an immersive rigor, not with the audience-pleasing instincts of a standup. Strong told me that, during the filming of the pilot, he asked Armstrong at one point whether they could spend some extra time exploring Kendall's history. "Jesse said, 'Let me sit with this for a minute,' and I went and got some lunch, and then twenty minutes later I got an e-mail entitled 'Window Rumination.' It was a fully realized monologue—a memory he'd created of Kendall visiting the office when he was six years old. He was like this little prince in the office, and everyone was adoring of him and smiling, and he kind of wandered off a little too far, and there was this huge guy, a security guard, who didn't know who he was, and it sort of escalated, and this six-year-old Kendall was powerless

and tongue-tied, until his father came and found him. It was a poignant and beautiful piece of writing, and, to me, central to this character's struggle and experience—being lost in this oceanic moment and being saved by his father's embrace." The scene didn't make it into the pilot, "but it's all embedded," Strong told me. "It was an amazing experience of finding this character together."

Armstrong told me that his ability to empathize with the Roys' flaws is likely connected to his having reached an age at which "you're more aware of the tragic things that can happen to yourself, and other people." He went on, "So-called dark or serious things can still be funny, but, as you get older, more terrible things happen to more people you know. The things you laughed at as a young person—you'd better be careful, because they could happen to you tomorrow. With jokes about old people wearing nappies, or infirmity—what are you laughing at? It's going to be you, or your mum and dad, tomorrow. There's nothing funny about that, and, if you think there is, you had better wonder about who is the subject of that joke."

In early 2020, when it became clear that the filming of Season 3 would not begin that April, as planned, Armstrong hunkered down in South London. Around that time, he wrote me an e-mail that captured the tenor of the city: "Panic buying is still at the embarrassed, English, 'what, I always buy this many lentils' stage." He told me that it remained to be seen whether current events would make it into the show "as a whiff or a stench." By the spring, the crisis had come into darker focus: Mark Blum, the actor who played the cruise-division executive Bill Lockhart in Seasons 1 and 2, had died from COVID-19 in New York City.

Weeks of delays turned into months. HBO executives were telling him to wait, Armstrong reported, "rather than have Logan do a series of Webinars we can put out on HBO Max." During the course of the next few months, the show's executive producer, Scott Ferguson, figured out the logistics of layering a COVID-19 safety unit on top of the regular production crew, at a cost of millions of extra dollars. Production finally resumed, in New York City, in November. In the end, Armstrong decided not to incorporate the pandemic into the plot. This time, the characters' habitual jetting around may seem even more exorbitant than usual.

The sequence at the Florence airport was filmed late in the shoot—an aberration. Armstrong prefers to film "Succession" in order. Although he begins the first day of production with a firm idea of where his characters will end up, their precise route is adjusted and refined along the way. In Florence, some dialogue was written on the spot, under the awning.

The dates of the airport shoot were dictated by location choices for the concluding episodes, which were to be set in the Tuscan countryside and around the Northern Italian lakes—landscapes of such loveliness that even the pitiless eye of Mark Mylod would have a hard time remaining jaundiced. At the Florence airport, Ferguson told me, "Quite honestly, I think every season Jesse has wanted to go to Italy. He also wanted a yacht the first season. So last season we got the yacht, and Italy is the second white whale."

In Italy, Armstrong was showing a tentative degree of confidence that the season would achieve what he had hoped for it. At the airport, we went into a hangar and retired to what he referred to as his "office": a solitary chair set up by a wall. "With any project, you go through waves of anxiety," he told me. "I had moments of 'Fuck, did we ever say that thing that we intended to say?'" He went on, "They say sometimes tennis players can see the ball quite big, and they feel like everything feels full of opportunity, and sometimes it will feel small, and nothing's coming together. Sometimes you feel, 'Oh, yes, I can do *this*, and now I can go *there*, and this sets up *this*.' That sense of 'I think I know what everyone's thinking—I can see this room is full of all these people, and they all have their own perspectives, and I can feel them all.' Then it feels full of possibility. I'm just wandering around the party, hearing what Gerri's saying to Karl. That's a fun feeling."

For the scenes shot in Tuscany, Armstrong wanted to play with the E. M. Forster version of the region—or, at least, with the visual fantasies promulgated by the popular Merchant Ivory film adaptation of "A Room with a View." He said, "I just felt it was a fun thing that British people do—that relationship to Tuscany, and those British vibrations of quite complicated snobbery about an area that has a certain resonance of cultural value for the British." Even if American viewers didn't pick up on all the ways in which "Succession" smuggles observations about British class into the narrative, he said, they would respond to the depiction if it rang true.

Armstrong hadn't had much time to himself since arriving in Florence, he said, though he had taken a walk from his hotel to visit the Palazzo Vecchio, which in the sixteenth century was the seat of Duke Cosimo I de' Medici. With international tourism all but halted, the exquisite city, marked by monuments to the dynastic powers that held sway five hundred years ago, was quieter and emptier than it had been in decades. Armstrong joked, "It's a little bit Logan Roy—'Close Florence, I'm coming through.'"

After two days at the airport, the production moved south, to the Val d'Orcia. Hundreds of crew members were scattered around villas and in hotels in various small towns. Armstrong landed in Pienza, a hilltop settlement built according to Renaissance principles of town planning at the order of Pope Pius II, a scion of Sienese nobility. Pienza's narrow pedestrian streets were scented with jasmine and pecorino, and its museums, former palazzi overlooking the valley, were empty. In the evening, the piping voices of a handful of Italian children playing in the town square echoed against the travertine façade of the cathedral. Then, when the clock struck eleven, a nationwide curfew began, and the town fell as silent as it would have been in the dark of a fifteenth-century night.

The first day in the Tuscan countryside, a scene from the penultimate episode was being shot, featuring Sarah Snook and Matthew Macfadyen as Shiv and Tom. The setting was Bagno Vignoni, an ancient spa settlement, and showed the couple seated at a café, then walking together around a sixteenth-century bathing pool in the

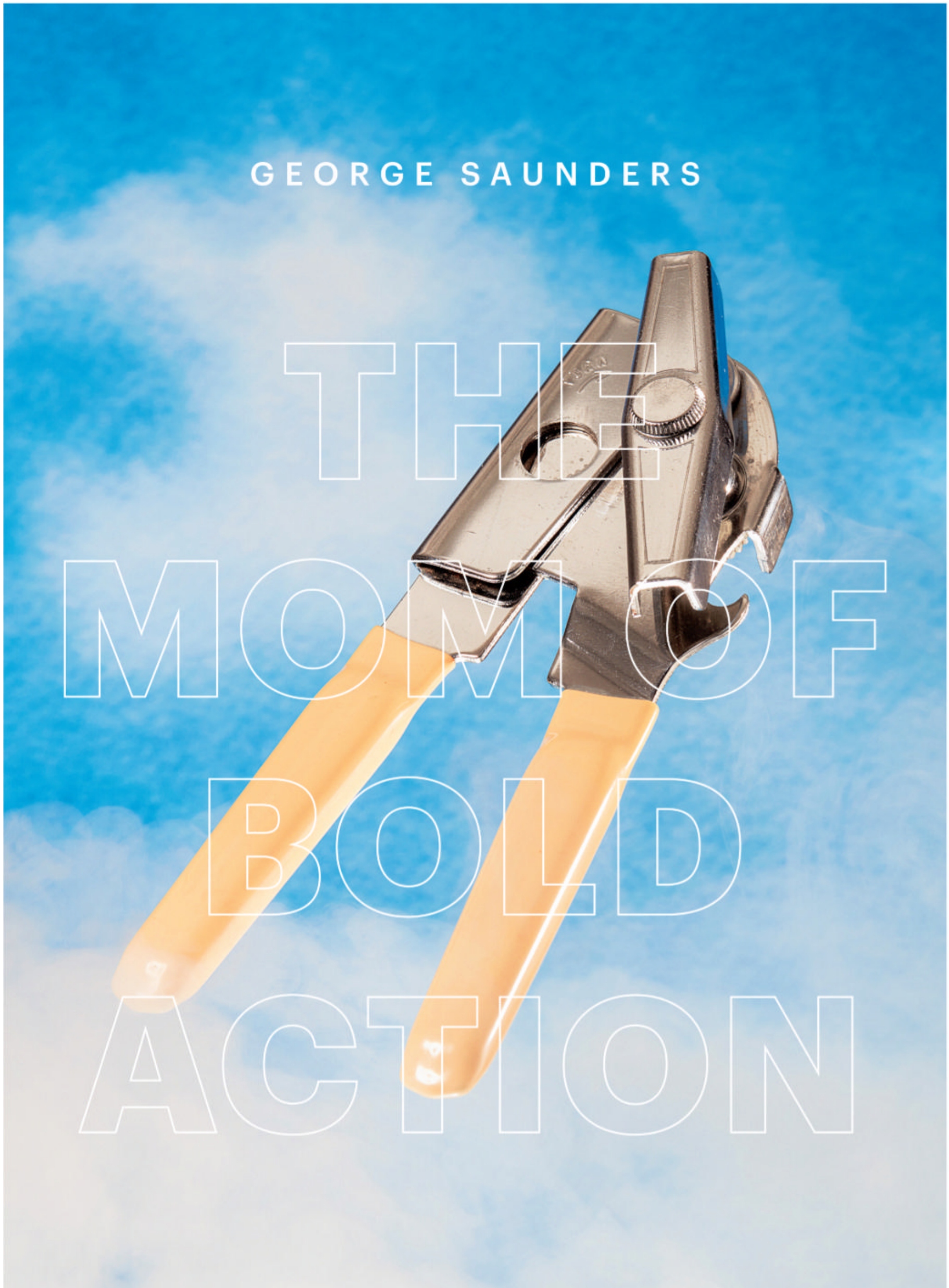
center of the village. It was a successor scene, Armstrong told me, to their brutal picnic in the final episode of Season 2, in which Tom confesses to Shiv, "I wonder if the sad I'd be without you would be less than the sad I get from being with you." Armstrong said, "I saw this as 'What's the next accommodation they will come to?' It's an intimate scene in which they either are frank with each other or appear to be trying to be frank with each other." The scene also harked back to the Season 1 finale, set on the couple's wedding night, in which Shiv belatedly tells Tom that she wants an open marriage, and ventures as close as she ever has to emotional honesty: "Love is, like, twenty-eight different things, and they all get lumped in together in this one sack, and there's a lot of things in that sack—it needs to get emptied out. There's fear, and jealousy, and revenge and control, and they all get wrapped up in really nice fucking wrapping paper."

As the crew arranged the scene, readying extras and setting tables, Armstrong, leaning against a honey-colored wall, said, "That's what's interesting about the people in the show—hopefully, they are not incapable of honesty." He went on, "Shiv is a passionate, driven, smart person, who I think occasionally gets glimpses of the way that her life could be integrated and whole and truthful. But they're really hard to keep hold of, especially when they brush up against other people. And, like the other characters in the show, she hasn't got very good facilities for compromise, or for taking into account other people's feelings." This was a moment, he said, in which his preferred Marxist lens—men and women make their own histories, but not the terms of their own making—proved useful as a way of situating the personal within the sociological. He observed, "We are all individuals with our own psychological makeup and impulses, and yet we find ourselves in vises of social and economic situations, which means that we are bent in and out of shape—and we're bent out of shape by the psychologies of our families. So navigating the space between those—that you can act outside of your material interests, but will you?—*that* is a good area for where the conflict between human beings happens."

• •

As part of his background research for shooting in the area, Armstrong had been reading "War in Val d'Orcia," the 1947 memoir of Iris Origo, the daughter of an American diplomat and Anglo-Irish aristocrat. Born in 1902, Origo, who became a biographer, was reared by her mother in a Medici palace in Florence, and married a member of the Italian nobility. In the twenties, the couple moved to La Foce, an estate in the Val d'Orcia. Origo's memoir chronicles, in diary form, the effects on the region of the advent of the Second World War, during which Origo and her husband took in children who had been evacuated from the cities and also housed fifty British prisoners of war.

In reading the book, Armstrong had been struck—just as he had been after the table read of the "Succession" pilot, in November, 2016—by how quickly people adapt to altered conditions: a change in political circumstance; the onset of a pandemic; even the encroaching horrors of war. "There's a moment when Mussolini is deposed, in 1943, and there's a sense of hope—the Allies are coming, and it feels like it might be the day after tomorrow. But there's still two more years of the war to go, and Iris Origo doesn't know it," he said. He had momentarily pulled down the face mask that covered his nose and mouth, in order to speak more clearly. "It's just very human, that thing of adjusting yourself to a new position," he went on. "Within seconds, the new world feels completely real and vivid, and you're very quickly accommodated to it." Then Armstrong raised his mask as he was called back to a video monitor, to watch another take. Snook and Macfadyen artfully interacted, with subtle variations in tone: more or less playful callousness on the part of Shiv, more or less submerged hurt and anger on the part of Tom. The characters moved and adjusted to their opulent constraints, in an evolving struggle whose conclusion—arriving in a future season—Armstrong had imagined but had yet to write. ♦



PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID BRANDON GEETING

Again she found herself spending her precious morning writing time pacing her lovable sty of a kitchen making no progress *at all.* Why was she holding a can opener?

Hmm.

That could be something.

"The Trusty Little Opener." Gerard the Can Opener was a dreamer. He wanted to open BIG things. BIGGER things. The BIGGEST things! But all he ever got to open was, uh, beans? Corn? Tuna?

You had to give him something essential to open, to save the day. Medicine? Heart medicine? You did not open heart medicine with a can opener. Tomato paste? Some beloved person in the household really longed for spaghetti? Old Italian gal. Friend to all. On her last legs. The spaghetti brought her back to Florence or whatever? But the modern, high-tech opener, Cliff, was out partying with a wicked colander and a cynical head of lettuce. Gerard saw his chance. Even though he dated back to the nineteen-sixties and didn't have a fancy rubber handle like Cliff, he could still open stuff. This was it! His chance to help dear sweet Mama Tinti get her final, pre-death bowl of—

Ugh.

Honestly.

Why was Mr. Potts going nuts behind the gate in the mudroom? She'd just given him three of those peanut-butter thingies.

"The Discontented Dog." The Discontented Dog was never happy. No matter how many peanut-butter thingies he was given. When he was in, he wanted out. When out—

She grabbed another peanut-butter thingie from the box.

"The Peanut-Butter Thingie Who Sacrificed Himself So the Other Peanut-Butter Thingies in the Box Could Live." Jim the Peanut-Butter Thingie pushed his peanut-shaped body higher and higher, toward the questing human hand. Jake and Polly watched, amazed. Was Jim *trying* to get eaten? "Go on, live your dreams, you two!" Jim shouted, as a thumb and a finger grasped him around his, uh, slender place. The place that, for Peanut-Butter Thingies, served as a waist.

She moved the gate, gave Mr. Potts the peanut-butter thingie, leaned out the door, called for Derek to come put Mr. Potts on the lead.

No reply.

"The Son Who Failed to Reply." Once upon a time, there was a son who, when called, failed to reply. Was he deliberately ignoring her? Because pre-adolescent? Was he masturbating yet? Was that her business? The mother faithfully checked underwear/sheets for signs of masturbation, so that, as needed, she could let him know, in her quiet way, that everyone, even famous people, even our great, historical—

"A Time for Oneself." George Washington, twelve years of age, lay in his bed. A fourposter, which had been made, as all beds were back then, by hand. Was it weird? What he'd been imagining? Their neighbor, Mrs. Betsy Alcott, in that formfitting bodice, reaching over to take off his tricorn hat? No: if a person felt something, it was, by definition, "normal." If he found himself touching himself while imagining the slender Mrs. Alcott bringing her quill pen absent-mindedly to her full lips, no doubt other little boys in other times and places had felt inclined to touch themselves while imagining similar things. Therefore, it was fine, what he was doing! He suddenly felt so free and, feeling free, began to dream of a new land, a land where all could feel as free as—

Lord. Nearly noon.

Time to sit down and actually write something.

Where was Derek, though? Seriously? She worried. As a baby, he'd had a collapsed lung.

You good? she'd called out last night, from bed.

You're turning him into a nervous wreck, Keith had said.

I'm fine, Derek called from his room. Also not deaf.

Lungs still going? Keith said.

Far as I can tell, Derek said.

We just worry, she said. We love you so much.

Right back atcha, Derek said.

Then there'd been this sweet silence.

She adored it. Having a family. TV families were always fricked up, but hers was something else entirely. They liked one another. Had so much fun. Trusted one another and confided in one another and accepted one another just as they were, no matter what.

Not out front, not out back.

What the hell, seriously? He'd promised to stay in the yard. And this was a kid who never broke a promise.

"The Boy Whose Bad Lung Conked Out in the Woods."

"The Boy Who Lay Feebly Calling Out for His Mom."

"The Boy Who Died Utterly Alone and Became One with the Spirits of the Forest."

And evermore the mother wandered the woods, seeking her lost boy.

Eek.

"The Mom Who Rushed Into the Woods but Once There Forgot How to Do CPR but Then Suddenly Remembered."

Oh God, oh God. Her cheeks were so hot.

Derek was hurt somewhere. She just knew it. A mother knew these things.

She grabbed her cell phone and the first-aid kit and—

Wait, whoa, hold on.

This right here was what Keith was always talking about. She was freaking out. She had a tendency to get worked up. Sometimes a mother did *not* just know these things. Last month, she'd just known that he'd been abducted from the bus stop. She'd raced down there in her bathrobe and house slippers. He'd seen her coming. Started shaking his head, like, Ma, no, no, no. But too late. The older boys were already imitating her shuffling run.

Once she'd dreamed he'd started smoking. In the dream, he'd been smoking a cigar. At Cub Scouts. Sort of flaunting it. He had a man's voice and, in that voice, asked Mr. Belden if there was a Smoking Merit Badge. Next morning, in real life, he'd busted her sniffing his clothes and started bawling the way he did when he was totally telling the truth but not being heard.

"Why would I *smoke*?" he'd said. "Ma, that's disgusting."

What you had to do was overrule your irrational fears. By learning the facts. She'd read about this in *Best Life*. One gal scared of flying had spent the month before her trip to China memorizing air-fatality statistics. A man afraid of snakes had come up with a mantra about the majority of snakes being nonpoisonous. In another article, parents, intending the best, had gone

too far. One mom, super-focussed on eating right, had turned her daughter anorexic. A dad had been too strict about violin practice and now his son hated music. Also, had panic attacks whenever near polished brown wood.

All over the world right now, thousands of boys were out farting around, having broken a promise they'd made to stay in the yard.

Most woods were not dangerous.

Generally, lungs did not just fail.

The world was not a scary or hostile place, and Derek was a smart little guy with a good head on his shoulders.

He was fine. What she was going to do was sit down and write something.

What she was not going to do was hover by the window.

Much.

"The Tree Who Longed to Come Inside." Once there was a tree who longed to come inside and sit by the woodstove. He knew this was weird. He knew that his fellow-trees were being cruelly burned in there. But, gosh, the kitchen looked so inviting. Because of all the hard work the mother had done. Painting and whatnot. When she should have been writing. The smoke pouring out of the chimney smelled so nice. The flesh of his fellow-trees, burning, smelled amazing.

Yikes.

Re-start.

Once there was a tree who longed to come inside. Tim the Tree felt so drawn to people. Even as a sapling, he'd just loved hearing them talk. Gosh, what was a "transmission leak"? What did the daddy mean by "You obsess too much"? What did the mommy mean by saying that "obsessing" was her "superpower," which she "used every day, in her work"? There were so many words to learn! What was "apology," what was "perturbed," what was "darling"? If the wind was blowing from the east, bending him slightly to the left, he could peer into the kitchen through the dirty little window over the sink, which hadn't been washed in ever so long, through which the mommy was now gazing out at him, worried look on her—

Re-start.

Tim the Tree loved his spot near the path into the woods, from which he could watch the comings and goings of the various forest denizens, large and small, such as bears, foxes, hikers, hunters, and, today—

A strange tableau.

That phrase just popped into her head. Derek walked into the yard. Stumbled. Blood on his face. Holy crap. Weaving like a little drunk.

She burst out of the house, followed by Mr. Potts, who, barking insanely, plowed right through the garden. She plowed through the garden herself, picked Derek up, plowed back through the garden, dropped onto the porch steps with him in her arms.

What happened, baby? she said. Baby, what happened?

Old guy, he said.

Old guy? she said. What old guy?

He came up behind me, he said. Pushed me down.

Where? she said.

Derek didn't want to say.

Sweetie, where were you? she said.

Church Street, he said.

That was—oh, my God, that was nearly downtown. Way disallowed.

Now was not the time.

She got him inside. Nose not broken. No teeth chipped. She called Keith at work. Called the police. Cleaned up Derek's face. It looked like he'd been clawed.

He just . . . pushed you down? she said.

Into a bush, he said.

Must have been a rose or blackberry.

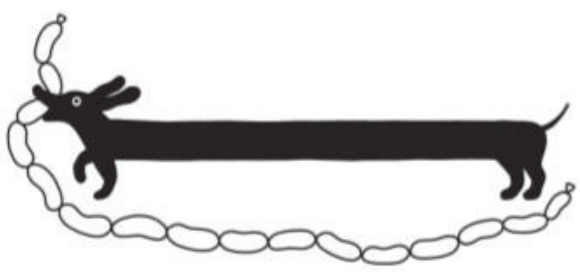
Jesus.

Ten minutes later, Keith walked in.

What's all this? he said.

Her phone rang.

The police had a guy. Already. Old guy. Kind of out of it. They'd found him wandering back and forth between



Church and Bellefree. Would she come down, have a look? Bring the kid, if he was up for it?

Oh, he's up for it, she said.

Guy was old, all right.

Long hair, missing teeth, gross sandals, eyes roaming anxiously all over the place.

Of course he denied it. Why would he push a kid down? He was just going through a rough patch right now. But that didn't mean he'd push a kid down. This false accusation was *part* of it. Had Glenda started this? Glenda had a network, of which it seemed the police were part. Also Jimmy Carter was part of it.

She and Keith and Derek and the cop watched on the cop's laptop as the guy was questioned.

I can't be sure, Derek said.

The cop gave her and Keith a look, like, He's going to need to be sure.

Oh, come on, what were the odds? An old guy pushes a kid down, and half an hour later an old guy's found a block away, off his rocker?

Well, now was the time for some parenting.

Some subtle guidance.

If this guy walks out of here, sweetie, she said, don't you think it's possible that he'll push some other kid down? And that kid might end up with more than just a few scratches?

Someone who'd do something like that needs help, pal, Keith said. And the only way he's going to get it is for us to start that process here and now.

How will it help him to be in jail? Derek said.

The look on the cop's face said, Well, good point.

Maybe he'll get some counselling in there, she said.

A grown man pushes a kid down for no reason, there's something wrong, Keith said.

Kind of irresponsible to just let that go, she said.

Derek asked for a couple of minutes to think it over.

Dear little guy.

A landline rang in a suboffice and the cop went in there to answer it.

"The Tough Decision." The boy sat in a silver desk chair, nervously swivelling, tracing one of the scratches on his face with his little finger. His mother, pretending to read a bulletin board so she wouldn't seem to be pressuring the lad, felt bad that he'd been put in this position by—that fucking bastard. Toothless hippie bastard. She should have bolted into the interrogation room and pushed his old ass down. Seen how he liked it. Although he was big. And you could tell from his face he had a mean streak.

The cop stepped out of the suboffice faster than . . . well, faster than you'd expect a cop to step out of a suboffice. He came out fast, went right past them, backed up. Like in a cartoon. You expected his rubbery tie to come zinging out of the suboffice a few seconds later.

Well, this takes the cake, he said.

What does? she said.

There's another, he said.

Another what? she said.

Old guy, he said. Over on Church. Wandering around. They're bringing him in.

The second old guy was nearly identical to the first. They could have been brothers. Old hippie, long hair, sandals, missing a tooth.

Different tooth.

But still.

She and Keith exchanged a look, like, Huh.

Second guy also claimed innocence. Seemed maybe slightly more lucid than the first. He had this wad of duct tape he was manhandling. Why didn't the cop take it away? Maybe it was considered a "possession"? Maybe he was "within his rights" to be tossing it distractedly from hand to hand?

Jesus.

This country.

They brought the first guy back and the two old hippies sat side by side, seemingly wary of each other. She felt that each, in his mind, was making the case for being the more intelligent, authentic washed-up former hippie.

Derek was about to cry. She could tell. It was too much pressure.

I honestly don't know, he whispered.

So she shut it down. And that was that. The two old freaks were free to go. She watched them from the window. They hit the lawn and darted off in different directions, fast, like minnows when you put your hand in the water.

At least we didn't put the wrong person in jail, Derek said in the car on the way home.

Long silence.

Well, yes and no, she felt. One of them had done it. Pushed Derek down. Had actually done it. Stepped up, pushed him down. Then sandal-flapped away, all pleased with himself. That had, for sure, happened in this world. Put both in the slammer, you'd be fifty per cent right.

"He sent me a handwritten breakup letter that was completely illegible, and here we are!"

• •

Now? One hundred per cent wrong. And who was suffering? Her little guy. Who was not suffering? Whichever one of them had done it. He was out there right now, bopping around town, crazy thoughts ramped up by this little victory, proof (to him) that his world view was, like, visionary or some such shit.

Unbelievable.

Damn.

"The Mom of Bold Action." It was surprisingly easy to get the gun. She wore the yellow dress, hair in a ponytail. She looked pretty but regular. The guy at the store applauded her intention to take lessons. He handed the [insert name of type of gun] right over. Could he please show her how to load it? He could. He did. Now she was driving slowly up Church. Here was the guy. The old hippie. Whichever one had done it. Seeing the gun, he confessed. No. She drove up behind him. There he was, about to shove down another kid. A little girl. In her Communion dress. It was just his thing, pushing kids down. Who knew why? Maybe he'd been pushed down himself as a—

No, nope.

He was just a sicko.

She hopped out of the car, dropped to one knee, took aim. *Blam*. Direct hit. In the leg. Which, being compassionate, she'd intended. Amazing how good a shot she was. Never having shot before. Well, she'd always been athletic. Down he went. Wounded, he confessed. Begged for mercy. But didn't really seem all that sorry. Was he messing with her? Was there a trace of mockery in his eyes as he fake-apologized? She pressed the gun against his sweaty forehead.

Geez, Jesus, what was she—

They were driving along the river. A kayaker was paddling against the current, shouting, either nuts or on his phone. Derek was in the back, slumped

against the door, looking pensive and deflated, feeling bad, she could tell, for not being sure which guy it had been, for causing this weird silent tension in the car.

Which, she suddenly realized, had been going on all this time.

I think you did perfect, she said. That was not easy, and you handled it beautifully.

Amen, Keith said.

I just wish I could remember, he said. I keep going over it in my mind.

And? Keith said.

Well, he was definitely wearing jeans, Derek said.

The car pulled up to their same old house. Which now seemed sad. The House of the Victims. In the past year, they'd re-roofed it, put on a new porch. For what? What was the big thing they were striving to be part of? Was it good? Did it make any sense? They'd done all that for what? So their kid could get pushed down by some freak? This was, so far, the biggest thing that had ever happened to them as a family.

The other houses in the neighborhood blinked the eyes that were their windows.

Better you than us, they thought.

"The House That Found Itself Suddenly Ostracized."

"The House Made Lonely Through No Fault of Its . . ."

Crap. Blah. Stupid.

The three of them sat there a bit in the ticking car.

I know I wasn't supposed to be downtown, Derek said. I just wanted to try it.

Fair enough, Keith said.

Such a good dad. Reasonable man. Dear heart. Always fine with—well, everything. Even this, apparently. Fine with Derek breaking his promise. Fine with some random creep assaulting their kid and walking away scot-free.

She felt—if she was being totally honest?—that, back at the station, Keith had, well, not failed them, exactly. She wouldn't go that far. But hadn't there been a time, back in the old days, when Keith, the powerful man of the house, would've pulled aside the other powerful man, the cop, and, between them, a deal would have been struck, and the two freaks would've been quietly led outside for a little "talk" and, oops, while out there, had the living shit beat out of them?

Both of them?

Just to be sure?

Well, that wasn't the best.

That wasn't, you know, fair.

Or whatever.

But geez. Neither one of those losers was exactly hitting the ball out of the park. For the sake of argument, let's say that Keith and the cop, choosing to err slightly on the side of proactivity, had (lightly, performatively) roughed up those two dopes. The one who'd done it? Wouldn't do it again. The one who hadn't done it—well, if, in the future, he ever considered doing something out of line, which he probably would, given the life he was leading, he'd think twice. Net result? A safer Church Street. Down which a nice kid like Derek could walk. Derek, in her mind, ambling down this old-timey Church Street, waved to an elderly couple drinking iced tea on their porch. Go around back, lad, use the tire swing on the old apple tree! the husband said. His wife was up there knitting. You remind us of our own son, now a successful doctor! she said, then dropped her yarn ball, which rolled off the porch, and the old guy made a joke about his back as he hobbled down the stairs to fetch it.

Good people.

Salt of the earth.

But Church Street did not belong to them. Or to Derek. It belonged to those two freaks, who, because freaky, were somehow the most powerful players in the whole idiotic deal. Why were rejects running the show? Seriously? It was all backward, because nobody wanted to hurt anybody's feelings, nobody was willing to say what they really thought, nobody cared enough to take a bold stand for what was right.

And things kept spiralling downward.

They walked to the porch through a pile of leaves. Which was no fun. Not today. Today, it was one more thing they had to do to get to the next not-fun thing. Which was dinner.

This was real. This had happened. A guy had attacked her kid and suffered no consequences whatsoever and was probably off bragging about it to some other deadbeats around a campfire or whatnot.

And what was she doing about it?

Going inside to boil pasta.

After dinner, she started writing some of this down. It was easy. It just flowed. It came straight from the heart. An essay. "Justice," she called it. Goodbye, can openers with big dreams; goodbye, talking trees; goodbye, Henry the Dutiful Ice-Cream-Truck Tire, that piece of crap she'd worked on for

MONDAY

I was just beginning
to wonder about my own life
and now I have to return to it
regardless of the weather
or how close I am to love.
Doesn't it bother you sometimes
what living is, what the day has turned into?
So many screens and meetings
and things to be late for.
Everyone truly deserves
a flute of champagne
for having made it this far!
Though it's such a disaster
to drink on a Monday.
To imagine who you would be
if you hadn't crossed the street
or married, if you hadn't
agreed to the job or the money
or how time just keeps going—
whoever agreed to that

has clearly not seen
the beginning of summer
or been to a party
or let themselves float
in the middle of a book
where for however briefly
it's possible to stay longer than
you should. Unfortunately
for me and you, we have
the rest of it to get to.
We must pretend
there's a blue painting
at the end of this poem.
And every time we look at it
we forget about ourselves.
And every time it looks at us
it forgives us for pain.

—*Alex Dimitrov*

most of last year; goodbye, forced optimism; goodbye, political correctness. This was the real shit. Wow. She knew just what to say. It was like walking across a creek and rocks kept appearing beneath her feet. It was like speaking out loud. But on paper. It was the most honest, original thing she'd ever written. It didn't sound like her, and yet it *was* her, for real.

Bang, yes, perfect.

She wrote late into the night.

In the morning, she came down to find Keith reading her pages. Her essay. Like, really reading it. She stood in the doorway watching. Well, this was new. This was different. Usually he read her work with this pained look on his face and afterward he'd say she had "a wild imagination" and had "clearly really been into it," although it was "probably just over his head," because he was "a dunce with no literary training."

Good? she said today.

Wow, he said.

His face was red and his leg was bouncing under the table.

Ha. That was nice. That was—flattering. She was totally wiped out this morning, but so what? She drifted into the kitchen, tidied up the little writing desk they'd bought at Target. So it would be ready. For the next burst. Keith yelled that he was going for a run. Wow. Keith hadn't gone running in years. It was as if reading her essay had made him want to be as good at something as she was at writing. Not to brag. But that was what good writing did, she realized: you said what you really thought and it made a kind of energy, and that sincere energy flowed into the mind of the reader. It was amazing. She was an *essayist*.

All these years she'd just been working in the wrong genre.

It had taken this terrible thing happening to Derek to make that clear. She wouldn't have chosen it. But it had happened. And now she had to honor it.

She sat down to write.

Her phone rang.

Story of her life.

They'd caught the second guy, the cop said, the one with the duct-tape ball, breaking into a car, and he'd confessed to pushing Derek down. The cop read her the guy's statement: "Yeah, I pushed him down. He seemed like a smug little shit. I don't know why I did it, really. But he lived. And now maybe he's not so smug. I bet not. You're welcome."

It's actually kind of funny, the cop said. They're cousins.

Who? she said.

The, uh, two suspects, he said. You know Dimini's? The furniture store? Gus Dimini's their uncle.

Wow, Dimini's. They'd bought their TV there. Nice place. Fading place. Their big thing was, on St. Patrick's Day, they gave away green socks. Called themselves O'Dimini's for the week. It had been an Irish neighborhood when she was a kid. Now it was—who knew what it was? Everything down there was boarded up. You'd see a huddle of shopping carts on a lawn. A wading pool full of crankshafts. The occasional Confederate flag. But Gus Dimini was a sweetie. Big round man, full white beard. Roaming benevolently around the place like it was a restaurant. Like he was about to seat you at one of his outdoor patio suites.

She should march in, identify herself as a good customer, who, over the years, had spent literally thousands of dollars in there. Demand that he do something. About his low-life nephews. Well, it hadn't literally been thousands. Just that one TV. On clearance. So, like, three hundred dollars. Point was, she was a *customer*. Maybe she should organize a boycott. Among whom, though? Whenever she drove past, the delivery van was the only vehicle in the lot. And sometimes Gus would be out there, sitting on a parking bumper, head in hands.

Anyway, it wasn't his job to control his stupid nephews.

Nephew.

She thought of Ricky. Her cousin. Who, on the day he was supposed to get married, had got wasted and thrown a tire iron through the window of a sporting-goods store and gone inside to sleep it off. They'd found him the next morning, a catcher's mitt on each hand. Ricky had got three girls pregnant in the same month and, in a fight with two of their dads at the same time, had broken one dad's nose and had his ribs broken by the other. He'd stolen a car—different time of life, many years later, when he was already the father of two (grown) kids—and driven to, or at least toward, California, but in Ohio had mouthed off to some bikers at a rest stop and been shipped back in a full-body cast, and then had assaulted a nurse in the hospital, after which, while in detention, he'd had a stroke and died.

Had they, had she, tried talking to Ricky? God, yes, over and over, every time

she saw him. He'd be moved to tears, promise to change, and then ask to borrow some money to start his auto-repair shop. His big idea was that he'd check the whole car over. How that was a big idea, she didn't get. When you declined to loan him the money, he'd say, So you're just like everybody else. A week later, you'd hear that he'd stolen a go-kart and driven it into a lake, or said some racist thing out loud at church, or overdosed, died, come back from the dead, overdosed again, raced out of the hospital, and tried to break into a parking meter.

In time, they'd all given up on him. Except Aunt Janet, who'd had her own struggles (brandy, night panics) but had never given up on Ricky, even after he was dead. She'd funded a little corner of the library, the Ricky Rodgers Memorial Reading Nook, and stocked it with books on substance abuse and Christianity and auto repair.

At least Ricky had never pushed a kid down. Well, that she knew of. Although he had punched an usher after saying that racist thing at church. And had, at one point, toward the end of his life, impregnated a seventeen-year-old. And burned down the grocery store the gal's father owned, after a cashier refused to let him go into the back room and pick through the stuff they were about to throw away. His plan was to take the stuff home for free, charge the store twenty bucks for his trouble.

That was Ricky.

Ah, Ricky, she thought. She'd been crazy about him when they were little. He was just a few years older than her. He'd been so fun. Not bad yet, not really, just energetic, tossing M-80s in the direction of the henhouse, putting spiders in Aunt Janet's slippers.

And now he was dead.

A dead, arrogant, loudmouthed, thoughtless, quasi-pedophilic, racist idiot.

Who, for a while, she'd thought was the greatest.

All these years, in her mind, she'd been defending Ricky, feeling sympathy for Ricky, or trying to, but you know what? Fuck Ricky. She thought about that pregnant seventeen-year-old's dad, that gut-punched usher, the owner of that sporting-goods store. Fuck Ricky. Someone should have dropped a rock on that idiot long ago.

I mean, yes, O.K.—some rocks had definitely been dropped on Ricky. Jail, foreclosure on that little dump on Webster he'd somehow cobbled together the money to buy, jail again, the bikers, that dad who'd broken his ribs, the group of parishioners at the church who'd knocked out his front teeth in the narthex, because, it turned out, the usher he'd punched had cancer and was the nicest guy in the world and had given a kidney to the pastor a few years earlier and they all loved him.

But it hadn't been enough, none of it had been enough, to get Ricky to pull head out of ass.

An image came into her mind: Ricky, in Hell, in those filthy coveralls he used to wear (which he'd stolen from the one auto shop where he'd managed to hold a job for more than a month), on fire, tears running down his face.

And he was small. So small. She could fit him in the palm of her hand.

Are you sorry? she said. For all that you did? Truly sorry?

It's so hot down here, he said.

But are you sorry? she said.

For what? he said.

Still stupid, still stubborn. Of course, that's why he was in Hell.

He'd been born stupid and stubborn and stayed stubborn and stupid because he was so stupid and stubborn.

Kind of unfair.

She lifted him out of Hell and put him in Heaven. Everything was pure and white. Right away he started angrily pacing around, leaving greasy footprints all over the place. The angels looked at her, like, You want to get this character out of here?

She closed both hands around Ricky like he was a little mouse, and really focussed, and burned all his greasiness away and was able to see, by reading his mind, that he was now, because of her loving focus, a different person. No trace of the old Ricky remained. No trace of the real, original Ricky.

She put him back in Heaven and he

"If you're serious about wanting to hug your family again, you're going to have to lower the drawbridge."

stood there, stunned, whoever he was.

She heard Keith galumph up onto the porch.

So much for writing time.

He burst in, flushed and sweaty, bandanna over one shoulder.

Good run? she said.

I didn't go on a run, he said.

True, weird, he was wearing khakis.

He'd found the guy, the first guy, he said, the one averse to Jimmy Carter, and given him one in the knee. With Derek's autographed bat. It hadn't—it hadn't gone that well. The guy had nearly taken the bat away from him. He'd managed to nail him, but just that once. Sort of a, you know—glancing blow? And the thing was, during it? His bandanna had slipped down. And the guy had recognized him. Hey, you're that dad dude, he'd said, in a tone of wonder, holding his knee. So. There was that. The plan was, had been, you know—take down both guys. Like in her essay? Teach them a lesson. About rules. About order. About "reverencing justice." But after that first hit? The sound it made? The wind had sort of gone out of his sails. The bat was in the river. He'd dropped it off the bridge. They'd have to get Derek a new one. And get it signed. By who, though? Did she—did she remember who'd signed it?

Then he collapsed on the couch, burst into tears. His face went all shrivelled-apple and he started soundlessly and in slow motion pounding his fist into the arm of the couch.

Like in her essay?

What the hell?

Wait, she said. Which guy? Did you hit?

The first one, he said. The one they brought in first.

She told him about the confession. That the second one had confessed. That he'd essentially, uh, kneecapped the wrong guy.

Oh, great, he said, as if the unfair thing had been done to him.

Derek came down.

Why is Dad crying? he said.

His aunt died, she said.

Which aunt? Derek said.

One you don't know, she said.

How would I not know an aunt of Dad's? he said.

Keith got up, went into the basement. What was he going to do down there? There was nothing down there but the washer and the dryer and a broken treadmill. Was he planning to do laundry? Probably. Sometimes he did that. When upset.

Pretty soon, she heard both washer and dryer going.

God.

Unusual man.

Can I send a note to Dad's uncle? Derek said.

She could tell he knew she was lying.

He's dead, too, she said. He died in a tragic hot-air-balloon accident.

Oh, that uncle, Derek said.

Look, she said. How about go up to your room?

Did Dad hit someone with a bat? Derek said.

Well, she said.

The guy who pushed me down? he said.

She thought about it a second.

Yes, she said.

He seemed pleased, slid across the floor in his socks, mimed a baseball swing.

Over on the Target desk was her essay.

Sitting there all proud of itself.

She sat down, started reading. It was—God. It was so bad. So harsh. It made no sense. Today. She was good—she was a good writer and all that, so, yes, it sort of flowed, but when you really broke it down, saw what it was actually saying—

Wow, Jesus.

She tore the pages in half, dropped them into the garbage, took the bag out of the can, took the bag to the can around the side of the house.

No more essays.

No more writing at all.

She could do more good in the world by, like, baking.

She sat on the porch swing. Imagined the guy Keith had hit, the innocent guy, jogging up the block, dropping down on the porch steps.

Look, she said, it's not that big a deal, right? You seem totally fine. It was, uh, a glancing blow. And wouldn't you have done the same? If it was your kid?

No, he said. I would not have hit a totally unrelated guy with a bat just because he looked like the guy who did it.

Well, yes, she said. Very admirable. But it's easy to say that, when you weren't actually in that—

That's called character, he said.

I didn't do it, she said. Keith did it.

The guy raised his eyebrows. Somehow he knew about that stupid essay.

Words matter, he said.

Oh, shut up, she said.

Now the shit was going to hit the fan. The system was about to come crashing down on them. On the good people. Who'd always, up until now, done everything right. Or at least had tried to.

From inside, her phone rang.

Perfect.

Same cop.

Little issue, he said. Leo Dimini came in here just now. Said he got attacked. With a bat. By someone he claimed was your husband. Would you know anything about that?

Attacked? she said. With a bat?

The falseness in her voice hung there, being mutually considered by the two of them.

I'm going to take that for a no, the cop said.

Keith is a good guy, she said.

He seemed like it, the cop said. But tell him—you know. No more baseball.

No more baseball, she said.

And if I could suggest something? he said.

O.K., she said.

Maybe we let it drop, he said. The, uh, pushing allegation. Might simplify things. The family's been talking among themselves. The idea is, you drop it about the pushing, they drop it about the bat attack. And Babe Ruth over there can, you know, sleep. Easy. Easier. And you, too.

In that instant, she saw it: God, she loved her life so much. The family of ducks that sometimes came waddling across the yard like they owned the place. The way Derek had recently started eating dinner with his winter hat on, elbows on the table, like a little trucker. Last week, Keith had arranged the plastic mini-animals on the windowsill (giraffe, cow, stork, penguin, elk) in a circle around a corn kernel and, in the elk's antlers, had stuck a Post-it note: "Worshipping some mysterious object."

How do we do that? she said. Drop it?

You just tell me to drop it, he said.

Now? she said.

Now works, he said.

After she hung up, she went down to the basement. Keith was sitting in an old lawn chair. There was a big pile of

clean laundry on the deck of the treadmill.

So, asshole just walks, he said.

Unless you buy a new bat and find him and hit him with it, she said.

It was supposed to be funny, but she could see he wasn't ready.

She reached for his hand. He took it, gave it a squeeze.

Give me a minute, he said.

Sure, she said.

In a way, they were lucky. Derek's face would heal. It would. The scratches were light. That guy could have taken the bat away from Keith and nailed him with it. Keith could have swung at the guy's head and killed him. Now, with this one concession, everything could go back to normal.

And it did.

A week passed, another week, a month. Then, just before Christmas, she found herself stopped at a light downtown.

Over on the sidewalk, near the war monument, was the guy. One of the guys. She couldn't tell which one.

Those two fuckers really were pretty much identical.

Then the other one came out from behind a maintenance shed, yapping away, dragging, on a leash of Christmas lights, a plastic reindeer he'd likely nabbed off somebody's lawn.

That was—wow. That was quite a limp. Quite a limp he had.

Quite a limp he had somehow got.

The two of them went off into the woods, having a good old time, arms around each other's shoulders, the two-person unit itself now seeming to have a limp, reindeer bouncing along in pursuit.

Someone behind her blasted his horn. She hit the gas, surged across the bridge.

Her face was suddenly hot. With shame. Oh God, oh shit. She'd done that. They had. Crippled an old fellow. Innocent old fellow. She'd made—well, she'd made an already unfortunate person's crappy life that much harder.

She had.

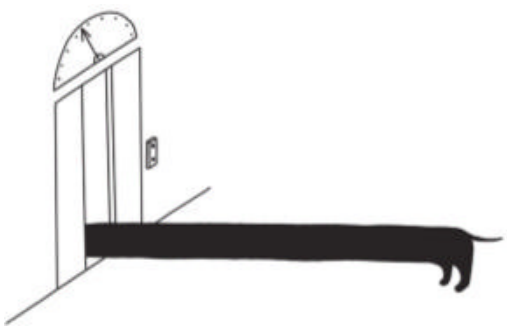
For real.

God, the hours of her life she'd spent trying to be good. Standing at the sink, deciding if some plastic tofu tub was recyclable. That time she'd hit a squirrel and circled back to see if she could rush it to the vet. No squirrel. But that didn't prove anything. It might have crawled off to die under a bush. She'd parked the car and looked under bush after bush until a lady came out of a hair salon to ask if she was O.K.

Walking through the mall, trying to offer a little positive vibe to everyone she passed. Refilling the dog's water because there were floaters in it. As if he cared. Maybe, on some level, he did. Maybe clean water made his life better? Incrementally? Sometimes she'd refold Derek's little shirts two or three times, wondering which way he'd find easiest to unfold. It mattered. Didn't it? When a shirt unfolded nicely and went right on, didn't that maybe give a kid an extra little burst of confidence?

How many shirts did you have to thoughtfully refold and how many staples did you have to pick up off the floor so nobody would get a staple in the foot and how many hours did you have to spend in the store trying to decide which fruit punch had the least high-fructose corn syrup and how many frazzled young girls with babies did you have to let cut in front of you at the post office and how many rude rejection letters did you have to decline to respond to just as rudely and how many nice familial meals did you have to put together while a great story idea sat dying in your mind, to offset one case of hobbling a hapless old—

The world was harsh. Too harsh. Make one mistake, pay for it the rest of your life. She thought of Mary Tillis, who'd rear-ended that minivan and two kids had died. Of Mr. Somers, who'd done something weird with the heater and gassed his elderly parents. Of that guy with the eye



patch at Boy Scouts, who'd sloppily secured a load of firewood and then a chunk flew through this lady's windshield and she'd driven off the bridge into the river and drowned while trapped in her car.

What was that guy's sin, the sin that had ruined his life, so that now, at Scouts, he was nearly always drunk, and during Pinewood Derby he'd gone charging out the exit door when one of the little cars flipped, leaving his kid, Maury, standing there, like, That's just my dad, sorry, he once killed a lady?

One bad knot.

Nine stupid pages.

Fuck.

She hated this feeling. This guilty feeling. She couldn't live with it.

The parkway was curving west, looping her away from the river into a region of failing strip malls and three lavish megachurches in a row.

That time with the squirrel, she'd gone home, confessed to Keith. They had a habit of mutual confession. Keith always forgave her, then contextualized her sin. Squirrels died all the time, he'd said. We're constantly killing thousands of living things (bugs), every time we drive. But what are we supposed to do? Not drive? Once Keith forgave her, it was only a matter of time before her guilt started to fade. Even when she'd been crushing so bad on Ed Temley from church, she'd confessed to Keith. Well, Ed's hot, Keith had said, even I can see that, and the day we stop noticing hot people we're pretty much corpses, right?

She imagined sitting across from Keith at the kitchen table.

Oh, hon, by the way? she'd say. Turns out? We gave that innocent old guy a limp. Which he'll take to his grave. So.

Keith would just sit there, stunned.

Maybe we offer to pay his hospital bill, he'd finally say. Or set him up with, you know, an orthopedic surgeon? Something like that?

Well, that opened some doors you didn't want opened. This was not a hippie with insurance. They'd be paying out of pocket. For his surgery. And there would go Derek's college money. That they'd worked so hard to save. And which wasn't going to be enough, anyway. If they kept saving at the current rate, they'd be good for freshman year, maybe. If the school wasn't great. There were limits. To what one could do. She'd fucked up, they'd fucked up, but they weren't gods, they were people, limited, emotional people, who sometimes made ill-advised—

That guy was—you know what?

He was not getting their money.

That was one step too far. That was unreasonable. Kind of weird.

Neurotic.

Overinvolved.

She pulled up to the house. It looked

crisp. Clean. All the work they'd done really had made it nicer.

A flock of geese came out of a low cloud, like miniature flying dinosaurs, emitting this weird, non-goose sound. A second group joined from the left and a third from the right and the greater flock flew off imperfectly in the direction of the high school.

She imagined a beam of white light shooting out of her forehead, an apology beam, charged with the notion *I am so sorry*, that travelled across town and crossed the river and roamed through the woods until it found the two guys and, having briefly paused above them because they looked so damned similar, entered the innocent one. Instantly he knew her. Knew her pain. Knew about Derek's lung thing and how out of step he was with his classmates, how he sometimes went to school with a stuffed bear in his shirt pocket, as if he thought that was a good look, poor dear, and the thing was, knowing her this completely, it all made sense to the guy. And there it was: forgiveness. That's what forgiveness *was*. He was her. Being her, he got it all, saw just how the whole thing had happened.

How could he be mad at her when he *was* her?

A green forgiveness beam shot out of his forehead, and flew back over the town, charged with the notion *To tell the truth, I never expected much from life anyway, and, given all the crap that's happened to me, most of which I caused, a slight limp is, believe me, the least of my worries. Plus, the pain is making me really attentive to every moment.*

The beam entered the car, hung there near the glove compartment.

Although I do have one request, it said.

Go ahead, she thought kindly.

Forgive my cousin, the beam said. *As I have forgiven you.*

Oh, brother. In a pig's ass.

Like that was happening.

Someday, maybe. Although probably not. She didn't have that in her. Just didn't. She hated that jerk. And always would.

You forgave Ricky, the beam said.

Your guy's no Ricky, she said.

Ricky was worse, the beam said.

Well, she said. If you knew Ricky.

If you knew my cousin, the beam said.

Anyway, it was all bullshit. There was no beam. She was just making it up with her mind.

• •

You are trapped in you, the beam said.

Yeah, well, who isn't? she thought.

For some reason, the flock of geese was now passing back overhead, headed in the opposite direction.

That's really the problem, though, isn't it? she thought.

Yes, the beam said.

She could see Keith moving around in the kitchen.

Good old Keith. Since the incident, he had—he had not been doing well. At night sometimes she'd hear him crying in the pantry.

And this week he'd been passed over at work again. People just—they didn't respect him. At the Christmas party last year, everyone kept talking over him. There'd been some kind of running joke about everyone funnelling the least desirable projects to Keith and Keith cluelessly accepting. He'd just sat there, fingering a poinsettia leaf that had fallen off the centerpiece. No one seemed to notice that they were hurting his feelings.

Sweet guy. Weak guy.

Her weak, sweet guy.

This limping info?

Was dying with her, here and now.

She was going to have to be kind of a sin-eater on this one.

What she had to do was go in there, say nothing. About the limp. Be cheerful, be happy. Make the Christmas cookies. As planned. At every turn, all evening, fight the urge to tell him. Tomorrow, when, again, she felt the urge, remind herself that she had already decided, here in the car, for the good of the family, not to tell him. Ever. Next day, same thing. With each passing day, the desire to tell him would diminish. And one day soon she'd get through the whole day without even thinking of telling him.

And that would be that.

She just had to start the process.

In the plastic bag on the passenger seat were a roll of parchment paper, a thing of sprinkles, three new cookie cutters. She had to reach over and pick up the bag and open the car door and drop one foot into the gray slush.

That, she could do.

That was something good she could actually do. ♦

NEWYORKER.COM
George Saunders on questions of justice.

THE CRITICS

ON TELEVISION

HONOR ROLE

"The Chair," on Netflix.

BY HUA HSU

In the words of Ji-Yoon Kim (Sandra Oh), the title character of the Netflix series "The Chair," the job of the college professor is to offer her students "refuge from the bullshit." The campus often seems our last bastion of idealism, where the pursuit of knowledge runs free from faddish politics or market imperatives. This makes it an easy place to ridicule. As the series begins, Kim is settling into her new role as the chair of the English department at Pembroke University, a prestigious "lower-tier Ivy." Kim is the first woman and the first person of color to lead the department, and when we meet her she is sitting behind an imposing desk in her new office—one of the position's few perks. She lets out the satisfied breath of someone looking forward to bold new work ahead. But she quickly realizes that she has inherited a "ticking time bomb."

Kim's cartoonishly out-of-touch colleagues grapple with declining class enrollments and blame the philistinism of kids these days. "You don't age out" of the professorate, a stalwart of the Old Guard explains. "You accumulate more wisdom." Naturally, such wisdom is depicted as useless in the face of the departmental copy machine, the swift judgment of RateMyProfessors.com, and the incursion of critical race theory. One of the department's pillars is Bill Dobson (Jay Duplass), an iconoclastic superstar whose courses remain popular despite the fact that he shows up unprepared. On the first day of class, he plugs in his laptop and inadvertently plays an intimate, NSFW video of his late wife.

If all of this sounds like a cranky think piece come to life, then it conveys the farcical tone set by "The Chair," which was created by Amanda Peet and Annie Julia Wyman, and executive-produced by the "Game of Thrones" creators David Benioff and D. B. Weiss. (The series is the first offering from Benioff and Weiss's deal with Netflix, which is reportedly worth two hundred million dollars.) There is still intrigue, but the palace is much smaller. Workplace dramas tend to exaggerate the thrills of the hospital, the police precinct, or the courtroom—settings where the stakes are already clear. The challenge for "The Chair" lies in normalizing aspects of a profession that might seem profoundly unrelatable to viewers: the obsession with status and prestige as opposed to getting rich, or the fact that existential quandaries still bedevil people who have been granted lifetime employment to ponder whatever it is that interests them. The animating dramas are set in motion when the university's dean (David Morse), who is more banal than sinister, enlists Kim in an effort to cull the faculty. The dean is powerless to fire anyone with tenure, so he encourages Kim to nudge the senior professors toward early retirement, which, compared with the plot drivers of most TV shows, is hardly life-or-death stuff.

But Kim, loath to betray her former mentors, instead tries to help them boost their enrollment numbers. This group is led by Elliot Rentz, a Melville expert played by Bob Balaban, whose trademark cold joylessness translates in the campus setting to a scholarly gravitas. He's joined by Joan Hambling (Holland Taylor, who is phenomenal), a crass, occasionally slapstick medievalist whose commitment to literature verges on the erotic. One of the darker, more absurdist plotlines involves Pembroke's faceless bureaucracy relocating Hambling's office to a spare room in the basement of the gymnasium. She goes to the Title IX office to file a complaint, and is dismayed to find the coördinator adhering to a more contemporary version of feminism, wearing shorts rather than a pants suit. There are other, more familiar, campus controversies: the well-meaning but inept attempts at diversity and inclusion, the improprieties that cloud a tenure case involving a Black colleague. One senior professor has a farting problem. During a lecture on modernism, Dobson ironically gives a Nazi salute, which results in a viral scandal, pitting academic freedom against the campus P.R. goons, who worry about the school's shrinking endowment. Most of Kim's time is spent protecting Dobson, her closest friend in the department, who is still grieving his wife's death. Their friendship is complicated by Kim's new authority, as well as by the possibility that they might become more than friends.

Kim's professional accomplishments lend contrast to a precarious personal life. She is brilliant in the classroom yet struggles to connect with her rebellious adopted daughter, Ju Ju. They lean on Kim's widowed father, who can't understand why his daughter is so busy, even after this ostensible promotion. He seems concerned that her prioritization of work will ruin her relationships.

In Dobson, we occasionally see the scruffy allure that established him as an illustrious professor—his eyes are always glinting, whether it's because of his deep love of poetry or, lately, because of pills. Yet

ABOVE: LALALIMOLA

Sandra Oh plays the newly elected chair of a struggling English department at a fictional élite university.

ILLUSTRATION BY GUSTAVO MAGALHÃES

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he also seems good at deploying that dishevelled brainiac charm to get out of trouble, such that he often comes across as Kim's other, even more difficult child. Once he's ensnared in controversy, he's unwilling to back down, and his attempts to defuse the situation with reason, rigor, and irony only inflame the students more. They are largely one-dimensional, like a synchronized mob, casting about for offense, taking turns speechifying and calling out anyone who disagrees with them.

What makes "The Chair" worth watching is Oh. Much has been written about her slow path to stardom, as she navigated the limitations imposed on Asian performers in American film and television. She has made a career out of reacting to others and playing complementary roles. Without a lane of her own, she mastered the performance of empathy, working off the energies of those around her. Were this real life, these are precisely the qualities that would make her a good chair. In his upcoming book, "How to Chair a Department," the scholar Kevin Dettmar outlines an uplifting case for how a chair can transform the culture of an institution, as long as she accepts that she is the "designated grown-up." This perfectly describes Kim, who is adept at the emotional labor of pacifying hot-shot egos, patiently making unloved professors feel useful again. The writers render her with nuance and a full range of feeling, as when she leaves campus and loses all semblance of professional authority, nagged by her father, challenged by a daughter too young to appreciate what she is going through.

Kim is clearly accustomed to accommodating other people's misunderstandings of who she is and where she stands as a person of Asian descent. At one point, a student warns her that there will be protests if Yaz McKay (Nana Mensah), a beloved young Black professor, is denied tenure. The student reminds Kim of McKay's vulnerability as a woman of color at a predominantly white institution. "I *know*," Kim replies, too exhausted to point out that she experiences this as well.

McKay's tenure case is absorbing drama, making better use of the campus setting than Dobson's brush with cancel culture. Her white colleagues pine for a return to Pembroke's good old days, yet their skills at textual analysis fail them when it comes to recognizing how she quietly seethes. She constantly looks unsettled, as though she is reacting to slight changes in the atmosphere. As McKay's patience dissolves, her situation draws out some of Kim's past obstacles. Kim explains that she waited her turn, and encourages McKay to play the game of "institutional power." But McKay points out that people like Rentz got to rule the profession for decades. Now he lectures to an empty room. "What are they without us at this point?"

As an English professor, I am in the tiny minority of people who approached "The Chair" invested in its verisimilitude. Academia can seem silly from the outside, full of very smart Luddites struggling with dongles. Yet it's also a place where people from different backgrounds and generations actually have to coexist with—if not learn from—one another. As the series goes on, it seems to understand this. In one surprisingly tender scene, Rentz reckons with an aging body that is failing him. It doesn't make him sympathetic, but it does affirm that he is human, rather than a caricature.

I don't know anyone who has gone through the trouble of becoming a professor with the express goal of ending up as a department chair. The role draws on organizational skills that many academics have made a career out of avoiding; it also leeches away time that could be spent researching or teaching. In academia's twentieth-century heyday, chairs might have felt as if they oversaw a fiefdom, warring with other departments for status and resources. Kim is a bit more like Tony Soprano, coming in at the end of an era, realizing that "the best is over."

From "The Wire" to "The Office," the powerlessness of middle management has been one of the great subjects of modern television. "The Chair" thrives in scenes where manners and decorum get stripped away and Kim recognizes the futility of her situation. Her strange profession begins to seem relatable. Her face, usually so attentive and patient, evinces rage and disappointment. One complication of institutional diversity is that diverse faces can now lead institutions that are in free fall. What accrues in the profession isn't just wisdom but resentment and frustration. For Kim, this isn't a refuge. It's bullshit. ♦

BOOKS

ARRIVALS

When the Chinese joined the gold rush, they were welcomed. That changed.

BY MICHAEL LUO

Until the middle of the nineteenth century, settlement of America's western frontier generally reached no farther than the Great Plains. The verdant land that Spanish conquistadors called Alta California had been claimed by Spain and then by Mexico, after it secured its independence, in 1821. In 1844, James K. Polk won the Presidency as a proponent of America's "manifest destiny," the belief that it was God's will for the United States to extend from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific, and soon took the country into a war with Mexico. Under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, in 1848, Mexico ceded California to the United States, along with the vast expanse of land that today comprises Nevada, parts of Arizona, and New Mexico.

California was sparsely populated and almost wholly separate from the rest of the country. Sailing there from the Eastern Seaboard, around South America, could take six months, and the overland journey was even more arduous. The fledgling town of San Francisco consisted of a collection of wood-frame and adobe buildings, connected by dirt paths, spread out on a series of slopes. Fewer than a thousand hardy inhabitants, many of them Mormons fleeing religious persecution, occupied the sandy, windswept settlement.

That changed with remarkable suddenness. On the morning of January 24, 1848, James W. Marshall was inspecting progress on the construction of a sawmill on the banks of the American River, in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains, about a hundred and thirty miles northeast of San Francisco. In his recounting, he spotted some glints in the water and picked up one or two metallic fragments. After studying them closely, he realized that they might be gold. Several days later, he returned to New Helvetia, a remote outpost in the Sacramento Valley, where he asked his business partner, John Sutter, to meet with him alone. The two men conducted a test with nitric acid and satisfied themselves that the find was genuine. Sutter implored those working the mill to keep quiet about the discovery, but, in May, 1848, a Mormon leader who owned a general store at the outpost travelled to San Francisco and heralded stunning news. "Gold! Gold! Gold from the American River!" he reportedly shouted as he strode through the streets, holding aloft a bottle full of gold dust and waving his hat. Within a few weeks, most of San Francisco's male population had decamped for the hills. The town's harbor was soon filled with abandoned ships whose crews had rushed off in search of wealth.

It is uncertain exactly how word of the gold rush reached China. According to one account, a visiting merchant from Guangdong Province named Chum Ming was among the many men who ventured into the Sierra Nevada foothills and struck it rich. As the story goes, Chum Ming wrote to a friend back home, and the news began to circulate. Mae Ngai, a professor of Asian American studies at Columbia University, begins her book "The Chinese Question" (Norton) with a more verifiable fact: the arrival of a ship carrying California gold—specifically, two and a half cups of gold dust—in Hong Kong on Christmas Day, 1848. A San Francisco agent of the Hudson's Bay Company, the fur-trading concern, had requested that British experts in China evaluate it. The ship also brought copies of the *Polynesian*, a Honolulu newspaper, which reported on the immense quantities of gold being extracted by prospectors in California.

Soon, word spread through villages

Tarred as a "coolie race," the Chinese were cast as a threat to free white labor.

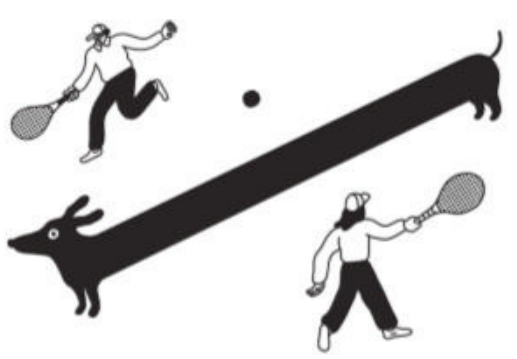
ILLUSTRATION BY MOJO WANG

across the Pearl River Delta, a populous area in southeastern China. At the time, it was illegal for Chinese citizens to leave the country, and Qing-dynasty officials offered little protection for emigrants. Nevertheless, men throughout the region began booking passage on ships bound for Gum Shan—Gold Mountain. Ngai writes that they were just like other gold seekers from around the world: farmers, artisans, and merchants, who mostly paid their own way or borrowed money for the voyage to America. The trip across the ocean was frequently a miserable experience. It generally took ten to twelve weeks to sail from Hong Kong to San Francisco. Shipmasters often stuffed the men into overcrowded, poorly ventilated, disease-ridden holds. One ship arrived in San Francisco harbor having lost a hundred Chinese en route, a fifth of those on board. "There can be no excuse before God or man for the terrible mortality which has occurred on some of the vessels containing Chinese passengers," William Speer, a Presbyterian missionary who treated many Chinese after they disembarked in San Francisco, wrote.

In 1849, three hundred and twenty-five Chinese passed through San Francisco's customhouse. The next year, the number increased to four hundred and fifty; the year after that, it was twenty-seven hundred. In 1852, the arrivals jumped to more than twenty thousand. By the late eighteen-fifties, Chinese immigrants made up about ten per cent of the state's population, and even more in mining districts. California, teeming with white Americans, Native people, Mexicans, Blacks, Chinese, Irish, Germans, Frenchmen, Hawaiians, and others, had become the substrate for a nettlesome experiment in multiracial democracy that had little precedent in the country's history.

At first, the reception for the Chinese in America was generally positive. In the summer of 1850, city leaders in San Francisco held a ceremony to welcome them. A small group of Chinese immigrants assembled in Portsmouth Square and were presented with Chinese books, Bibles, and religious tracts. The Reverend Albert Williams, of the First Presbyterian Church, who was among the speakers, later wrote that they were united in conveying "the pleasure shared in common by the citizens of San Francisco, at their presence," and in the hope that more of their brethren would join them in America, where they would enjoy "welcome and protection." In January, 1852, in an annual message to the state legislature, John McDougal, California's second governor, called for more Chinese to come. McDougal, a Democrat, had advocated at California's constitutional convention for excluding from the state certain classes of Black people. But he believed the Chinese could be a source of cheap labor for white Americans. He suggested that the Chinese, "one of the most worthy classes of our new adopted citizens," could help with the gruelling work of draining swamplands to make them arable. Many California businessmen envisaged a golden age of trade between China and the United States and embraced Chinese immigration as part of that interchange.

As the numbers of Chinese climbed, however, curiosity gave way to hostility in the mining districts. In the spring of 1852, a gathering of miners in the town of Columbia, in the Sierra Nevada foothills, approved resolutions that denounced the flooding of the state with "degraded Asiatics" and barred Chinese from mining in the area. Around the same time, along the banks of the north fork of the American River, several



dozen white miners reportedly drove off two hundred Chinese miners, and then, accompanied by a band playing music, headed to another camp to do the same to four hundred more.

Ngai explains that McDougal's successor as governor, John Bigler, a Democrat facing a difficult reëlection campaign, recognized a political opportunity in the growing anti-Chinese sentiment. In April, 1852, he called on the state legislature to limit Chinese immigration. His speech was filled with racial overtones, alluding to a coming inundation from China and misleadingly depicting Chinese immigrants as coolie laborers, bound by oppressive contracts. Bigler's tarring of the Chinese as a "coolie race" would prove to be a resilient epithet, becoming a convenient political instrument whenever white Americans on the West Coast needed a racial scapegoat, Ngai writes. The label likened the Chinese to enslaved Black people and, therefore, cast them as a threat to free white labor. Bigler explicitly differentiated the Chinese from white European immigrants, arguing that the Chinese had come to America not to receive the "blessings of a free government" but only to "acquire a certain amount of the precious metals" and then return home. He also doubted that the "yellow or tawny races of the Asiatics" could become citizens under the country's naturalization laws even if they wanted to. Anti-coolieism, Ngai writes, became a kind of shape-shifting, racist cause.

The Chinese of the gold-rush era are mostly anonymous to us today. The absence of their voices from historical accounts perhaps contributes to the mistaken impression that they were passive in the face of abuse. Ngai helps make clear that this was far from the case. Shortly after Bigler's 1852 comments, for instance, two Chinese merchants, Hab Wa and Tong Achick, issued a confident retort that was republished in newspapers across the country. Growing up in Macau, Tong had attended a school founded by Protestant missionaries, and he was fluent in English. He was the head of one of the biggest Chinese-owned businesses in San Francisco. He and Hab went to great lengths to dismantle Bigler's claims. "The poor Chinaman does not come here as a slave," they wrote. "He comes because of his desire for independence, and he is assisted by the charity of his countrymen, which they bestow on him safely, because he is industrious and honestly repays them. When he gets to the mines, he sets to work with patience, industry, temperance, and economy." They insisted, too, that Bigler was wrong that the Chinese were not interested in citizenship: "If

the privileges of your laws are open to us, some of us will doubtless acquire your habits, your language, your ideas, your feelings, your morals, your forms, and become citizens of your country."

The citizenship issue underscored the ways in which the Chinese complicated America's racial stratification. The Nationality Act of 1790 stipulated that you had to be a "free, white person" of "good character" to qualify for naturalization, but Ngai points out that some Chinese did manage to become citizens during the nineteenth century. Norman Assing, a prominent Chinese merchant, was apparently one of them. In 1849, Assing (whose Chinese name was Yuan Sheng), having previously spent time in New York and Charleston, South Carolina, arrived in San Francisco, where he opened a restaurant, started a trading company, and became an important leader in the Chinese community. His own response to Bigler was published in a San Francisco newspaper a month after the comments. Assing, who described himself as "a Chinaman, a republican, and a lover of free institutions," assailed Bigler for a message that threatened to "prejudice the public mind against my people, to enable those who wait the opportunity to hunt them down, and rob them of the rewards of their toil." The Framers of the Constitution, he maintained, would never have countenanced "an aristocracy of skin."

As Chinese immigration increased, mutual-aid organizations, or *huiguan*, representing people from different regions and dialect groups, formed to assist new arrivals. Most immigrants came from just four counties, in the western part of the Pearl River Delta, and each had its own *huiguan*. Why this parcel of China, no bigger in size than Connecticut, accounted for so much immigration to America remains the subject of debate. When the inhabitants of the Siyi, as the counties are known, began making their way to America, it was a time of upheaval in their homeland. The population had risen, making land increasingly scarce. Political tumult was also roiling China. The worst unrest came during the Taiping Rebellion, in which at least ten million people were killed. In Guangdong, an insurgency by members of a secret society, who became known as the "red turbans," and a savage conflict between the Punti population and the Hakka, a minority group, contributed to the turmoil. Yet other regions of China experienced greater economic privation, and the timing and the location of the upheavals don't quite correspond with the overseas exodus. A decisive factor seems to be that the inhabitants of the Pearl River Delta were unusually familiar with the West. Canton (now Guangzhou), the provincial capital, had a long history as an important trading port and had extensive ties to California. It was also a frequent destination for American merchants and missionaries. Hong Kong, another commercial hub, was just a short journey away by boat.

"Don't worry, Ma'am—it's weekend service, so there's lots of time to get help."

In early 1853, the heads of the four *huiguan* met with members of the state assembly's committee on mines and mining interests. Through Tong Achick, who served as the group's interpreter and represented one of the associations, the *huiguan* leaders condemned the mistreatment of Chinese immigrants in the mines and voiced other grievances, including the fact that Chinese testimony was not being allowed in court. The committee members were, in many respects, sympathetic. In the majority report, they expressed skepticism that America was in danger of being overrun by Chinese and pushed for an expansion of trade between the two countries. The *huiguan* leaders, for their part, promised to do their utmost to discourage more of their countrymen from coming. "We have no authority there, but very confidently believe we could exert much influence," Tong said, suggesting that immigration would soon taper off. The promise of Gold Mountain riches, however, proved irresistible. Despite rising hostilities, the Chinese continued to come.

Huie Kin was born in 1854 and grew up in Wing Ning, a tiny rice-farming village of about seventy people tucked away in the hills of Xinning (known today as Taishan), an impoverished, mountainous county in Guangdong Province. At one end of the village was a bamboo grove; at the other was a fishpond. Huie shared a room with his father, along with the family cow; the kitchen stove occupied one corner. His mother slept in the only other room. Because the space was so cramped, Huie's

"SCENE: Two writers, one a hipster and the other nondescript, realize real life is crazier than fiction, and just give up and start to transcribe stuff. Cue busboy . . ."

• •

two brothers slept at the village shrine; his two sisters spent their nights at a home for unmarried girls.

One day, as he later recalled in a memoir, a member of his clan returned from America with stories of gold found in riverbeds. Huie became obsessed with travelling to Gold Mountain, and three cousins joined him in his resolve. To Huie's surprise, his father supported his decision, and borrowed money from a wealthy neighbor, using their family farm as security on the loan, to pay for his passage. On a spring day in 1868, the fourteen-year-old Huie and his three cousins left their village before daybreak, each with just a bedroll and a bamboo basket carrying their belongings, and caught a small boat to Hong Kong. While waiting for their ship to depart for America, Huie spent his days on the waterfront; he saw his first Europeans, "strange people, with fiery hair and blue-grey eyes." Finally, they set sail on a large ship with three heavy masts and billowing sails. Midway through the two-month voyage, Huie's eldest cousin, the leader of their group, suddenly became feverish and died; his body was wrapped in a sheet and lowered into the ocean. Huie and his other cousins stood for hours staring out into the inky blackness, overwhelmed by grief. When the fog lifted on a cool September morning and they finally glimpsed land, the feeling was indescribable, as he later wrote: "To be actually at the 'Golden Gate' of the land of our dreams!"

By the time Huie and his cousins arrived in California, the gold rush there was over. Most of the easily worked claims were depleted. Individual prospecting in creeks and streams—washing and sifting dirt, looking for gold nuggets—had given way to larger-scale industrial mining operations that employed legions of Chinese. Some Chinese miners moved on to other territories, such as Oregon and Idaho, where gold had been discovered as well. Huie's first job was as a household servant, making a dollar-fifty a week. Thousands of other Chinese earned wages building the transcontinental railroad which were far more lucrative than they could garner in China. Still more were employed in factories making cigars, slippers, and woollen garments; some even began running their own factories. Others capitalized on their success in the goldfields to open stores or restaurants.

Gold Mountain prosperity set in motion a cycle of migration. Fathers sent for sons; brothers wrote to brothers and cousins; returning villagers inspired others to venture across the ocean. Lee Chew was a sixteen-year-old in Guangdong when a man came back from America and constructed a palatial estate in their village, taking up four city blocks. "The man had gone away from our village a poor boy," Lee later wrote. "Now he returned with unlimited wealth, which he had obtained in the country of the American wizards." Lee said he became fixated on the idea that he, too, could become a wealthy man in America. His father gave him the equivalent of a hundred dollars, and Lee travelled to Hong Kong with five other boys from his village. They each paid fifty dollars for steerage passage on a steamship to America. He worked for two years as a household servant and then started a laundry, before eventually opening a store in New York's Chinatown.

In the mid-eighteen-seventies, the United States entered into a prolonged economic depression. By 1877, nearly a quarter of the workforce in San Francisco was reportedly unemployed. The result was a cauldron of fifteen thousand idle white workmen. Anti-coolie clubs spread, calling for boycotts against goods that did not have a label that said "Made by White Labor." Violence against the Chinese became increasingly frequent. "The Chinese were in a pitiable condition in those days," Huie Kin recalled. "We were simply terrified; we kept indoors after dark for fear of being shot in the back. Children spit upon us as we passed by and called us rats."

Even though several million Irish and German immigrants had streamed into American cities, it was whites' resentment toward the Chinese that became a virulent nationwide movement. In 1876, the national platforms of both the Republicans and the Democrats singled out "Mongolian" immigration as a problem. (As Ngai observed, for the party of Lincoln, in particular, the stand marked a shocking retreat from the principles of equal rights.) On May 6, 1882, President Chester Arthur signed into law a ban on the immigration of

Chinese laborers, which became known as the Chinese Exclusion Act. The law also prohibited Chinese from becoming naturalized citizens. For the first time in its history, America closed its gates to a class of people on the basis of race.

But the violence against the Chinese did not stop. "The Chinese Must Go" (Harvard), by Beth Lew-Williams, a history professor at Princeton, includes a list of almost two hundred communities that between 1885 and 1887 expelled, or attempted to expel, Chinese. In Tacoma, a group of white vigilantes forced about two hundred Chinese to leave, in November, 1885, and the Chinese sent anguished telegrams to the authorities, begging for help: "People driving Chinamen from Tacoma. Why sheriff no protect. Answer."

Handwritten letters in neat cursive from officials in the Chinese legation to Thomas Bayard, the Secretary of State, read like a diary of violence. American-style pogroms raged in Squak Valley, Coal Creek, Tacoma, Seattle, and on and on. In September, 1885, two Chinese officials and an interpreter travelled to Rock Springs, in the Wyoming Territory, to investigate a brutal episode in which white coal miners massacred at least twenty-eight Chinese and drove out several hundred others, torching their homes and firing on them as they fled. A report from Huang Sih Chuen, the Chinese consul in New York, identified each Chinese victim: "Tom He Yew was 34 years. He had a mother, wife and daughter at home. Mar Tse Choy was 34 years. He had parents, wife and daughter at home. Leo Lung Siang was 36 years. He had a wife at home." Husbands, brothers, fathers, sons, killed in a faraway land where they would never cease to be regarded as strangers.

The ordeal of the Chinese in America is only a portion of the history of persecution documented in "The Chinese Question." Ngai's principal insight is that the story of Chinese exclusion is a global one. Soon after the American gold rush began, hundreds of thousands of fortune hunters from around the world began converging on British colonies in Australia, after gold was discovered there. Just as in America, violence and efforts to halt the influx followed, culminating in a series of initiatives that came to be known as the "White Australia" policy. Early in the twentieth century, the British colony known as Transvaal, in southern Africa, became the setting for another harrowing episode for Chinese migrants, after mining magnates began importing tens of thousands of indentured laborers from China. Deep antagonism developed between Chinese miners and their white bosses, triggering violence, strikes, and other disturbances. In 1907, a newly elected colonial government in Transvaal, led by two Afrikaners who favored white supremacy and racial segregation, ended the Chinese-labor program. At the same time, the government moved to restrict Asian immigration and the rights of Indians and Chinese living in the colony. Ngai points out the similarity to the anti-coolieism rhetoric on the other side of the world: "Americans and British alike opposed the 'slavery' of the Chinese—but did not support their freedom."

In the United States, the Chinese-exclusion laws were not repealed until 1943, and the impetus was not an overdue reckoning with the country's egalitarian values but a shift in the geopolitical order. China had become an ally of the United States in its war against Japan. Still, the number of Chinese immigrants allowed into the country was negligible. The national-origins quota system that favored immigration from northern and western Europe was not set aside until 1965. Australia and South Africa did not begin to lift their restrictions on Chinese immigration until the nineteen-seventies. The grandchildren of Chinese immigrants who survived the bigotry and violence of the late nineteenth century in America are the grandparents of fifth-generation Chinese Americans today.

More than a century later, the global struggle over the Chinese Question has receded, but the complicated racial dynamics resulting from Asian immigration to the Western world have not. The years from the California gold rush to the end of the Chinese-labor program in South Africa coincided with a humbling period for China, as it contended with foreign incursions, internal rebellions, and financial crises. Today, by contrast, China is an economic, political, and military juggernaut, vying with the United States for global influence. Both Democrats and Republicans have sought to amplify the threat posed by China's authoritarian regime. This approach has raised anew the bugbear of the unassimilable Other in our midst. When President Trump spoke about the "China virus" and the "kung flu," it was possible to hear echoes of John Bigler invoking Chinese coolies, and British settlers warning about the Asian hordes. "The Chinese Question never really went away," Ngai writes. "The idea that China poses a threat to Euro-American civilizations remained just beneath the surface."

And yet the status of Asian immigrants in America today is, indisputably, different. The United States is undergoing a demographic transformation. Asian Americans are the fastest-growing racial or ethnic group in the country; their numbers have grown twentyfold since 1965. Much of the modern wave of immigration has been linked to skill-based allocations, and the Asian immigrant has often come to be seen as a success story, the "model minority." It's a misleading characterization; income inequality among Asian Americans is the highest of any racial or ethnic group. Nevertheless, Asian immigrants are no longer viewed as definitively nonwhite, as they were in the nineteenth century; in some circles, they're considered "white-adjacent." The historian Ellen D. Wu has traced the emergence of the model-minority story to Cold War imperatives, as American policymakers sought to renovate the country's image, amid the tumult over the civil rights of Black Americans. In a contest of moral suasion, a narrative of Asian American ascent was a powerful way to burnish the credentials of the United States as a beacon of freedom and opportunity for all. But the surge in anti-Asian attacks during the coronavirus pandemic is merely the latest evidence of the brittleness of this narrative. Overt discrimination against Chinese or other Asian immigrants may no longer be legally sanctioned, and violent expulsions of Chinese may be a matter of history, but for many Asian Americans a sense of belonging remains elusive. ♦

BOOKS

SENTIMENTAL EDUCATION

Simone de Beauvoir's lost novel of early love.

BY MERVE EMRE

The legend of Simone de Beauvoir—of how an obedient Catholic schoolgirl cast off her rigid, patriarchal upbringing to become the high priestess of existential feminism—is often narrated as a love story. Her biographers trace her escape from the bourgeois Parisian milieu into which she was born, in 1908, first to the Sorbonne and then to the École Normale Supérieure. There, among the "graceless faces" of the *agrégation* candidates of 1929, she spied Jean-Paul Sartre, twenty-four years old and—as she rhapsodized in "Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter" (1958), the first of four autobiographical volumes—"still young enough to feel emotional about his future whenever he heard a saxophone playing after his third martini." Together, she and her "Playboy," her "Leprechaun," as she called him, chased life's pleasures up the steps of Boulevard du Montparnasse, down the Avenue d'Orléans, and all around the woodland parks of Paris, where her parents had forbidden her and her sister to speak with children outside their social class. Beauvoir's mother was devoted to the Church and its rigid moralism; her father detested intellectuals and wanted his oldest daughter to "marry a country cousin." By the time she met Sartre, Beauvoir had different aspirations. "Never have I so loved to read and think, never have I been so alive and happy or envisioned a future so rich. Oh! Jean-Paul, dear Jean-Paul, thank you," she wrote in her diary.

Beauvoir's life with Sartre was shadowed by the memory of a dead classmate.

For all the romance of the city blooming before her eyes, Beauvoir always played the love story itself—her dawning attraction to this garrulous, cross-eyed, funny little man—remarkably cool. She liked Sartre's face and company but disliked his "false eye." She was more painfully and earnestly attracted to her friend the philosopher René Maheu, and even to her rakish cousin Jacques. But she exulted in Sartre's attention to her; it was an opportunity to define herself and the force she longed to be in the world. "We used to talk about all kinds of things, but especially about a subject which interested me above all others: myself," she wrote. "Whenever other people made attempts to analyse me, they did so from the standpoint of their own little worlds, and this used to exasperate me. But Sartre always tried to see me as part of my own scheme of things, to understand me in light of my own set of values and attitudes." With him, she was not "the Other," the subordinate female position that she described in her 1949 feminist classic, "The Second Sex": a timid and imaginatively impoverished creature for whom love was simply something provided to a husband as a matter of course. Beauvoir's relationship with Sartre, as she recounts it in her autobiographical writings, led her from a state of alienation, in which she was only a bit player in other people's "little worlds," to the assurance that she was a singular and irreducible "Self." She could define and interpret the meaning of her life through the energetic exercise of her "sovereign consciousness."

Beauvoir's autobiography, in a sense, accorded perfectly with the principles of French existentialism—its insistence on the freedom of every person's consciousness and its Sartrean slogan that "existence precedes essence." Perhaps the correspondence is a little too neat. True, intellectuals often pride themselves on living and loving by their theories—"There is no divorce between philosophy and life," Beauvoir famously avowed—but it is hard to believe the story of their early days quite as she tells it. Not a hair is out of place, not

ILLUSTRATION BY KARLOTTA FREIER

a moment of shock or doubt ripples the surface of her triumphant self-determination. "Every woman in love recognizes herself in Hans Andersen's little mermaid who exchanged her fish-tail for a woman's legs for love, and then found herself walking on needles and burning coals," she claims in "The Second Sex." How to reconcile such self-abnegating masochism with her joyous recollection of discovering herself with Sartre?

As careful readers of Beauvoir's memoirs and diaries have noted, the strategically plotted romance between post-war France's greatest male and female philosophers is haunted by the presence of a shadowy third—a friend. The most extreme feelings of agitation and rapture are reserved not for Sartre but for Elisabeth Lacoin, a brilliant and mercurial classmate whom Beauvoir called Zaza, and whose name Beauvoir underlined in black or brown ink throughout her diaries, casting a pall over all that surrounded it.

They met when they were around ten, under the uncharitable eyes of the nuns at the Cours Désirs school and the contemptuous gaze of Zaza's "odious mother," as Beauvoir described her. Whereas the Beauvoirs lived in genteel poverty, Zaza was a member of the haute bourgeoisie, the third of nine children, and "very high-strung, like a sleek and elegant racehorse ready to bolt out of control," as Beauvoir's sister sniffed to the biographer Deirdre Bair. Zaza had been bred to marry, and to marry well. Nothing could convince Madame Lacoin otherwise: not Zaza's nimble, mischievous mind, which won her a place at the Sorbonne; not her enthusiasm for literature or her talent for music; not her love for Beauvoir's classmate the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, called Jean Pradelle in Beauvoir's memoirs. Zaza, torn between her fealty to her mother and her thirst for freedom, grew wretched, frantic, and frighteningly thin, until one day, in the autumn of 1929, while Beauvoir and Sartre were embarking on their affair, she came down with a fever and an agonizing headache—a case of viral encephalitis, the doctors suspected. She died in a clinic at Saint-Cloud, where she kept calling out for her "violin, Pradelle, Simone, champagne."

"I loved Zaza with an intensity which could not be accounted for by any established set of rules and conventions," Beauvoir recalled in her memoirs, almost thirty years after her friend's death. "The least praise from Zaza overwhelmed me with joy; the sarcastic smiles she so frequently gave me were a terrible torment." She describes her "subjugation" to her beloved as plunging her "into the black depths of humility." It was in these depths that Beauvoir's abject "little mermaid" swam: her idea of love as a state of sacrifice and suffering was provoked not by a man but by what the literary critic Lisa Appignanesi describes, with delicacy, as one of Beauvoir's "amorous friendships" with a woman. Others have been bolder about calling a spade a spade. "Simone was in the throes of her first great love affair," her adopted daughter and literary executor, Sylvie Le Bon de Beauvoir, writes in an afterword to "Les Inséparables," a novel about Zaza's radiant life and swift death, which Beauvoir wrote in the winter of 1954 and then abandoned. It finally appeared in France last year, and now, as if to make up for lost time, appears in not one but two English translations—in the U.K. as "The Inseparables" (Vintage), translated by Lauren Elkin, and in the United States as "Inseparable" (Ecco), translated by Sandra Smith. The story, described in France as "a tragic lesbian love story," has been billed as "too intimate" to be published during Beauvoir's lifetime.

"The Inseparables" begins as most love stories do, with the meeting of two young people, each alien to the other. One day, at the Collège Adelaïde, a nine-year-old girl with startlingly dark, fervent eyes and a hollow little face sits next to Sylvie Lepage. The girl's name is Andrée Gallard, and it is her first time at school. Immediately, she offers Sylvie a glimpse of the pain and the pleasure of the flesh inflamed. When she was younger, she reveals, her skirt caught fire as she stood too close to some potatoes roasting on a campfire. She burned her thigh right down to the bone, and the wound still bulged under her skirt. This incident establishes the asymmetry that defines their relationship. "Nothing so interesting had ever happened to me," Sylvie thinks. "It suddenly seemed as if nothing had ever happened to me at all."

About Sylvie, our first-person narrator, we learn very little; on the surface, she is a conventional child of the Parisian middle class. Underneath, her tremendous powers of observation are fixed on Andrée, who appears to her a splendid and uncanny creature. Andrée addresses their teachers as equals, in a voice that is polite but insouciant. She plays the piano and the violin with easy mastery, speaks of "Don Quixote and Cyrano de Bergerac as if they had existed in flesh and blood," and turns somersaults and cartwheels with unexpected vigor. Her every word is cause for Sylvie's turmoil; the idea of her absence is, quite simply, unbearable. "Life without her would be death," Sylvie reflects when they are reunited after a summer apart. "It was in those moments that I was most troublingly aware of the gift she had received from heaven, which I found so enthralling: her personality."

Sylvie's feeling for Andrée as they grow up is not just love; it is a transcendent love, the love by which all other loves must be defined and judged. "I could only conceive of one kind of love: the love I had for her," Sylvie thinks. "The kind of love where you kiss"—by which she means kiss men—"had no truth for me." Yet Sylvie's love is not reciprocated, because Andrée's "love for her mother made her other attachments pale by comparison." In turn, Andrée's filial love is not reciprocated, either, because Madame Gallard sees her daughter not as dazzlingly and inimitably alive but as a performer of "social duties," a girl of marriageable age whose piety and obedience to her family must be preserved if she is to become a respectable woman. "No doubt she loved Andrée in her way, but what way was that?" Sylvie wonders. "That was the question. We all loved her, only differently."

The drama of "The Inseparables" lies in the tension between these competing and imperfectly requited loves for Andrée: first the loves of Sylvie and Madame Gallard, then the love of Pascal, a joyful Catholic philosopher (the Merleau-Ponty figure) who allows Andrée to imagine that she might reconcile duty and happiness—at least until he begins

to delay proposing marriage to her. The problem that preoccupies the novel is not who loves Andrée best but what kind of love would grant her the freedom she craves. As the girls grow, Sylvie finds herself repulsed by the religiosity of the Gallard family and Pascal, and her faith in God is replaced by her quasi-spiritual devotion to Andrée. The novel leaps from one glorious tableau to another of Andrée in divine solitude, praying or playing her violin in a park. Alongside Sylvie, we, as readers, stop, stay, and bear witness to an outpouring of reverence:

> When I sometimes went to pray in the chapel, often I would find she had arrived there first, on her knees before the altar, her head in her hands, or reaching her arms towards a station of the cross. Was she contemplating one day taking her vows? And yet she so loved her freedom, and the joys of this world. Her eyes shone when she told me about her holidays, how she spent hours galloping on horseback through the forests of pine trees, getting scratched by their branches as she went, how she swam through still waters in ponds, or in the freshwater of the Adour river. Was she dreaming about that paradise when she sat motionless before her notebooks, with a lost look in her eye?

The unpretending beauty of passages like this, of which there are many, derives from an aesthetic of distance: the pleasure of coming upon Andrée with her head hidden in her hands, reaching away from Sylvie toward an ineffable dream; the wide-open spaces of woods and water. Here is an attentive and unintimate love, one that relishes the idea of imagining, but never knowing and never delimiting, the infinite expanses of another person's mind. This love has nothing to do with the masterful assertion of selfhood that Beauvoir attributes to her relationship with Sartre. Rather, it recalls the theory of love advanced by a classmate at the Sorbonne, the philosopher and mystic Simone Weil. "To love purely is to consent to distance, it is to adore the distance between ourselves and that which we love," Weil wrote. "To empty ourselves of our false divinity, to deny ourselves, to give up being the centre of the world in imagination. . . . Such consent is love." Ironically, perhaps, "The Inseparables" posits separateness as love's aesthetic and ethical essence.

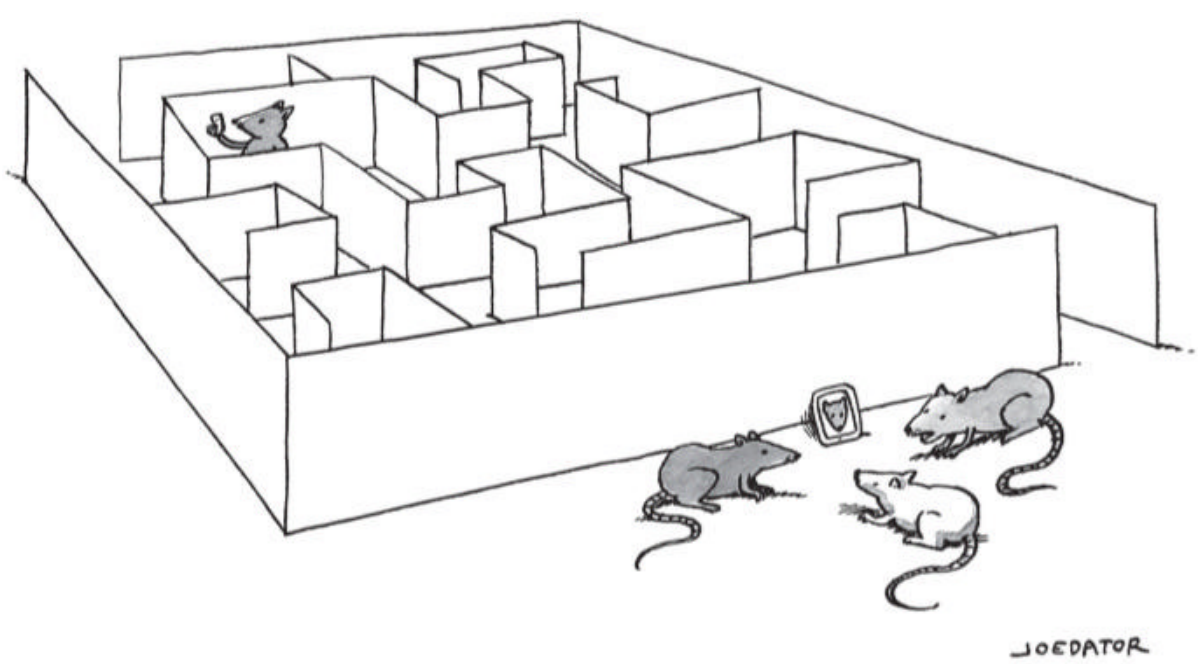
Compare Sylvie's quiet, luminous imagination with the loud pileup of possessions that she sees crowding Andrée in the Gallards' pantry, where Andrée's mother keeps her busy to acclimate her to the duties of marriage:

> Everything was made of cast iron, earthenware, stoneware, porcelain, tin, aluminium; there were cooking pots, frying pans, saucepans, skillets, cauldrons, casseroles, soup bowls, serving platters, tureens, tumblers, colanders, mincers, mills, moulds, and mortars. An endless variety of bowls, cups, glasses, champagne flutes and coupes, plates, saucers, sauce boats, jars, jugs, pitchers, carafes. Does each kind of spoon, ladle, fork and knife really have its own particular purpose? Do we really have so many different needs to satisfy? This clandestine subterranean world must turn up on the surface of the earth for enormous and discerning dinner parties that I knew nothing about.

There is something mesmerizing about these absurdly specialized utensils; one can almost hear them clattering their way into the girls' hands. Yet the pleasure of abundance quickly yields to the claustrophobic hell of domesticity, the spiritual death of the girl in the process of becoming the good wife. For all Madame Gallard's talk of God, there is no room for divinity amid such clutter. When, at the novel's end, Pascal refuses to propose to Andrée, and she falls into a defeated, feverish oblivion and dies, her grave is piled with white flowers, symbols of her untrammelled virtue. Their excess recalls the excess of kitchenware heaped upon the woman-to-be, who has, in dying, simply exchanged one tomb for another. "A dark insight occurred to me: Andrée had suffocated in all this whiteness," Sylvie thinks. "Atop that immaculate abundance, I lay down three red roses."

One wonders if Beauvoir would have approved of the novel's publication nearly seventy years after she drafted it. "When I showed it to Sartre after two or three months, he held his nose," she recalled in "Force of Circumstance," the third volume of her memoirs. "I couldn't have agreed more: the story seemed to have no inner necessity and failed to hold the reader's interest." Whether her concurrence with Sartre is feigned is impossible to determine; certainly it seems overeager. I suspect that Beauvoir, picking up her pen, was pricked by two conflicting compulsions—the desire to summon her ghost and the desire to exorcise her forever. And perhaps, too, Sartre found it inconvenient that another had preëmpted him as Beauvoir's first love. Much of her fiction up to that point, such as "She Came to Stay" and "The Mandarins," had concerned him and her, and had done much to enshrine the myth of their "essential love" with all its "contingent love affairs."

Notwithstanding the salaciousness surrounding the novel's release today, it reveals nothing new about the facts of Beauvoir's life. Nearly all the events related in "The Inseparables"—Sylvie's thwarted love, Pascal's refusal to propose, Andrée's death—were repurposed, four years later, in "Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter," often nearly word for word. And neither book marked Lacoin's first



"Howard's stuck in transit—he'll be FaceTiming in."

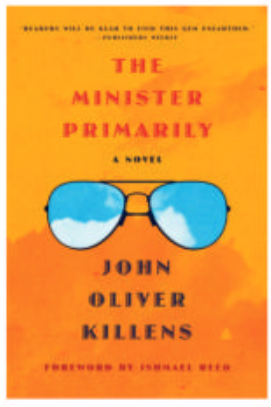
appearance in Beauvoir's writing. In "When Things of the Spirit Come First," a collection of stories she began in 1935, Lacoin was disguised as Anne, a young woman who dies after her Catholic mother manipulates her into giving up the man she loves. When it came to telling the story of Zaza, the distinction between fiction and nonfiction was, for Beauvoir, largely ornamental, a matter of swapping names and places.

The true "inseparables" are not Andrée and Sylvie, or Zaza and Simone, but the discarded novel and the wildly successful memoir. The novel restores Zaza to her rightful place as a subject, presenting her as a singular being, incomparable and ultimately unknowable to the narrator herself. It is propelled by the jealous, curious, melancholy, and blissful contractions of eros without any expectation of reciprocity. The Andrée / Zaza figure is permitted to live and die on her own terms, her story untethered from the future fame or philosophical rationalizations of the narrator, who is, in these pages, nobody of note at all.

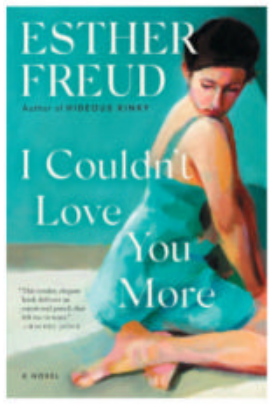
"Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter," by contrast, treats the story of Zaza as a single thread in the large, complicated, and busy tapestry of Beauvoir's early life. As if to agitate against the asymmetry of feeling between her and Zaza in life, Beauvoir framed her journey to selfhood in her memoir through Zaza's loss of it. The writer, by surviving the friend who had outshone her, became "both mind and memory, the essential Subject." The idea that their fates were entangled in a zero-sum struggle between female freedom and bondage, Self and Other, repeats in the memoir's final sentences: "She has often appeared to me at night, her face all yellow under a pink sun-bonnet, and seeming to gaze reproachfully at me. We had fought together against the revolting fate that had lain ahead of us, and for a long time, I believed that I had paid for my own freedom with her death."

Why the reproachful gaze? If there is something touching about Beauvoir's persistent elegiac impulse, then there is also a strain of cruelty in her consignment of Zaza to the role of the Other in the memoirs. Her submission to Simone is consistent with Beauvoir's

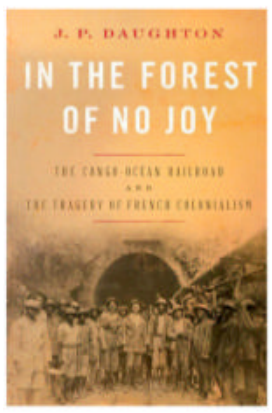
BRIEFLY NOTED



The Minister Primarily, *by John Oliver Killens (Amistad)*. Unpublished for more than thirty years after its author's death, in 1987, this madcap novel is set in the imagined African nation of Guanaya, where the discovery of mineral deposits has drawn international interest. Our hero, an African American musician from Mississippi, has come for a different reason—to "get to the heart of being African and all at once and in a hurry." But he bears an uncanny resemblance to the Guanayan Prime Minister, and, following a series of bureaucratic mishaps, he is recruited to return to America posing as the P.M. The absurd situation gives Killens a perfect vantage from which to satirize international race relations.



I Couldn't Love You More, *by Esther Freud (Ecco)*. Across three generations, the Irish women in this novel endure the self-centeredness of their menfolk. The story of Aoife, the matriarch, emerges as she talks to her husband, unresponsive on his deathbed. We learn about her daughter Rosaleen's love affair with an artist in the nineteen-sixties, and of her detention, as an unwed mother, in one of Ireland's Magdalene Laundries. The daughter she was forced to give up for adoption, Kate, narrates her struggle to care for her unfaithful, alcoholic husband and their daughter. Each woman is as trapped as the father of her child is free; each seeks a mother-daughter connection; and each learns that "as her heart opened, it would also break."



In the Forest of No Joy, *by J. P. Daughton (Norton)*. This unsparing history delves into French colonial archives detailing the deadly construction of the Congo-Océan Railroad. From 1921 to 1934, at least twenty thousand Africans working on the project, which was championed as key to local development, perished of starvation, disease, or physical abuse. Mostly forced laborers, they toiled without machinery, clearing forests by hand and turning rocks into gravel with hammers. One man, identified simply as "No. 8846," lost a third of his body weight within weeks. By highlighting individual stories, Daughton upends the Eurocentric narrative of the documents he studies, in which "white triumph would always discount African trauma."

Pure Flame, *by Michelle Orange (Farrar, Straus & Giroux)*. For much of her life, the author of this memoir found her mother, who shed maternal responsibilities in order to climb the corporate ladder, a prickly conundrum. But, when her mother became terminally ill, Orange started trying to understand the impact that decision had on her life. The book chronicles the pair's conversations—Orange's mother, though clear-eyed about workplace sexism, refused to identify as a feminist—and places their personal story within a larger framework of feminist thinking about mothers and daughters, drawing on the works of Simone de Beauvoir, Susan Sontag, and Adrienne Rich. What Orange writes about the death of Beauvoir's mother may also be true for her: "The loss freed her to see the connection as well as the severance, the mutuality and interdependence."

understanding of youthful lesbianism in "The Second Sex." In the chapter titled "The Girl," Beauvoir explained with cool conviction that "nearly all girls have lesbian tendencies; these tendencies are barely distinguishable from narcissistic delights." Lesbianism among girls was the handmaid to heterosexual self-determination, and no one was a more dutiful handmaid than a best girlfriend. The argument destigmatizes lesbianism while also minimizing its erotic and social power, its centrality to both pleasure and politics. But the book undercuts its own position, through the sheer descriptive delight with which Beauvoir writes of the sweetness of a woman's skin and the curves of her body—not to mention the repeated disgust with which she details heterosexual intercourse. "It is as if the very subject of lesbianism makes Beauvoir incapable of organising her thought," the critic Toril Moi has observed. Desire, when improperly acknowledged, gives birth to a theory that tells on its author.

To read "The Inseparables" is to learn what could have been, and to judge what was a little more harshly. It is to see in the memoirs a lingering refusal to give Zaza the autonomy that everyone in life seems to have denied her at the greatest possible cost. And it is to see in "The Second Sex" an inability, or perhaps an unwillingness, to make as affirmative a case as possible for lesbian identity. Was it "because she did not trust her own fragmentary experience or her understanding of it?" the literary critic Meryl Altman has asked. "Because she did not feel she could, or should, speak for others?" Or, we might wonder, was it because she wanted to enfold it calmly and quietly into a general theory of love?

Love is often defined through opposition and negation: love versus friendship, love versus hate, love versus indifference, love versus money. Yet the most moving part of "The Inseparables" is a dedication addressed directly to Zaza, which suggests a different axis along which love comes into focus: death. "If there are tears in my eyes tonight, is it because you are no longer alive, or because I am?" Beauvoir wonders. "I should dedicate this story to you, but I know that you no longer exist anywhere, and my writing to you like this is pure literary artifice. In any case, this isn't really your story, only one inspired by us. You were not Andrée; nor was I Sylvie, who speaks in my name." What is the purpose of an utterance destined to remain unread by its designated addressee? Why speak when the one you speak to will never answer?

In "The Inseparables," the distinction between friends and lovers, straight love and queer love, pales before the difference between loving a friend who is alive and one who is dead. As Jacques Derrida shows in "Politics of Friendship," many great meditations on friendship—by Cicero, by Montaigne, by Bataille, by Blanchot—are also meditations on mourning. These mourners "entrust and refuse" the death of the friend by committing his essence to words, his spirit to memory. The figure of the dead friend is not a test of love's endurance but, rather, an act of ritual purification. The author's address to "the unique one" is converted into a universal language, an utterance directed not to one but to many. The project of grieving a friend is one of flinging pleas and promises and imprecations into the abyss, hoping against all hope to hear something other than the echo of your own voice.

For Derrida, death lays bare the essential separateness of the friend not only in death but also in life—the belief in alterity that has structured all theories of modern friendship since Montaigne described a friend as one who "surpassed me by an infinite distance." In death's shadow, this separateness reaches its unbearable limit. It was this limit that Beauvoir spent much of her life pushing against, not just by stirring the memory of Zaza again and again in her writing but also by attempting to find another such relationship—that is, to reincarnate Zaza. Beauvoir's long relationship with Sylvie Le Bon, whom she adopted and made her executor before she died, was the last of these endeavors. "You can explain my feeling for Sylvie by comparing it to my friendship for Zaza. I have kept my nostalgia for that my whole life. Since she died, I have often desired to have an intense, daily, and total relationship with a woman," she claimed. Yet a surrogate is usually a poor imitation of the original. Only now that Zaza and Beauvoir are both dead can a kind of reciprocity be restored. Neither can speak; neither can listen. Neither can be known to anyone anymore, let alone to each other.

"Doubtless it was my friendship with Zaza which made me attach so much weight to the perfect union of two human beings; discovering the world together and as it were making a gift of their discoveries to one another, they would, I felt, take possession of it in a specially privileged way," Beauvoir wrote in her memoirs. The description evokes other idealized relationships that haunt her writing. The first is the love between adult women described in the chapter of "The Second Sex" titled "The Lesbian." This love transcends the narcissistic closeness of love between girls, in a beautiful balancing of selves. "Between women, love is contemplation," Beauvoir wrote. "Separation is eliminated, there is neither fight nor victory nor defeat; each one is both subject and object, sovereign and slave in exact reciprocity." She knew, of course, that there was no actual human relationship that this described. It was a utopia on par with the idea of the living communing with the dead. But it was a utopia she claimed for women, the women that she and Zaza had never been together.

The other idealized relationship is the impersonal intimacy between reader and writer. As Beauvoir must have known from her great love of Proust, reading and writing were, for him, the truest forms of "sincere" friendship, for they were the purest attempts to converse with a person who was absent or dead. Friendship with the living offered merely the cool veneer of "friendliness," Proust wrote, for immediately it trapped us in conventions of "deference, gratitude, and devotion" that led nowhere but back into the hollows of our own anxious minds. What Beauvoir in "The Inseparables" calls the "pure literary artifice" of speaking to a mute, inglorious reader points to the sincere friendship and queer love tangled deep in the heart of her writing. It is a friendship that we are now invited to partake of as her reader, the two inseparables' shadowy third. ♦

BOOKS

DOOM STROLLING

Are we losing our ability to wander?

BY ALEJANDRO CHACOFF

In the essay "Street Haunting," published in 1927, Virginia Woolf describes nighttime walks through London as a kind of escape from the self. A city dweller, drawn to the "irresponsibility which darkness and lamplight bestow," takes to the street to join the "vast republican army of anonymous trampers." Woolf goes on, "The shell-like covering which our souls have excreted to house themselves, to make for themselves a shape distinct from others, is broken, and there is left of all these wrinkles and roughness a central oyster of perceptiveness, an enormous eye." For Woolf, this is a matter not merely of voyeurism but of empathy: the street-haunter cherishes the "illusion," nourished by rambling, "that one is not tethered to a single mind, but can put on briefly for a few minutes the bodies and minds of others."

The rambler Woolf describes is estranged enough to observe from a distance and compassionate enough to imaginatively experience other people's histories, if only for a while. The idea of the urban rambler—the flâneur—as a half-belonging creature took hold in the latter half of the nineteenth century, and adopted a variety of forms in the twentieth. "The flâneur is still on the threshold, of the city as of the bourgeois class," Walter Benjamin wrote, a few years after Woolf's essay appeared. "Neither has yet engulfed him; in neither is he at home. He seeks refuge in the crowd." Not being at home, not being penned in, is the essential thing: the writers who turned flânerie into a literary tradition traverse the borders of genre as well as of neighborhoods, from Charles Baudelaire, with his essay-poems, to W. G. Sebald, with his novel-essays. In "The Practice of Everyday Life," published in 1980, the French historian Michel de Certeau makes the analogy explicit. "The art of 'turning' phrases finds an equivalent in an art of composing a path," he writes. Rambling is akin to the "drifting of 'figurative' language."

In the past few decades, the British audio producer Duncan Minshull has collected examples of this drifting, indefinite genre in a series of anthologies. The two most recent, "Beneath My Feet: Writers on Walking" and its companion volume, "Sauntering: Writers Walk Europe" (Notting Hill), include excerpts and fragments from works by eighty authors, presenting a beguiling panorama of wanderers from different eras and geographies. The oldest entry in either book is by Petrarch, and dates to 1336; the newest comes from Robert Macfarlane's "Underlands," which was published in 2019. "Beneath My Feet" includes a portion of Woolf's "Street Haunting," though the collection otherwise revolves mostly around the pastoral ramble; it has a sort of patron saint in Henry David Thoreau, who is quoted by multiple contributors and is the author of one of the book's longest entries, a reverie on the muted exhilaration of walking through snowy fields. "Sauntering" is a more general assemblage, with no principal setting or guiding figure. Like his subjects, Minshull wanders, lifting contributions from people all over the literary map: philosophers, novelists, essayists, critics, children's authors—even a composer, Beethoven, who appears in "Sauntering" with a series of short letters and notes from the woods of Vienna.

The books' contributors tend toward the illustrious: Michel de Montaigne and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Mark Twain and Katherine Mansfield, Edith Wharton and Richard Wright. But the grandeur of these bylines is offset by a curatorial playfulness—the selections are often radically concise, at times almost to the point of absurdity. (Benjamin and

Antonio Muñoz Molina's latest novel reads like a cautionary tale.

ILLUSTRATION BY YANN KEBBI

Baudelaire get about a sentence each.) Minshull, who also edited "The Burning Leg: Walking Scenes from Classic Fiction" and "While Wandering: A Walking Companion," appears to have become more confident in his selective whims over time. "Sauntering" includes a passage from D. H. Lawrence's travel book "Sea and Sardinia," in which Lawrence, largely standing still at a window, observes the Venetian carnival; the implication seems to be that a perceptive eye is more fundamental to rambling than putting one foot in front of the other. Minshull's goal, one gathers, is less to trace a historiography of the rambler than to expand the genre of flânerie, with an open-endedness true to its spirit.

Amid such variety, what holds the two volumes together is a remarkable consistency of mood. The odd mixture of detachment and warmth that Woolf identifies in "Street Haunting" seems to kindle, in writer after writer, a penchant for speculation and description rather than for the more settled elements of character and narrative. "I want to see my vague notions float like the down of the thistle before the breeze," William Hazlitt writes in the essay "On Going a Journey," reprinted in full in "Beneath My Feet." This relationship between physical and mental wandering is resilient across epochs, appearing amid wars and during general peace, in periods of boom and of bust. From Petrarch to Macfarlane, minds roam as much as feet do.

The joys of Minshull's anthologies have been particularly keen during the past months' intermittent periods of confinement. The temporary disappearance of crowds caused by the coronavirus pandemic sharpened my desire to be among them, and it was impossible not to envy the carefree mood of these wanderers as they made their way through faraway villages and cities, jostling with strangers. I was filled with longing but also with a sense of remoteness: even the more recent entries, from just a few years ago, seemed to belong to a different era, when smartphones didn't short-circuit every meandering thought and the news cycle didn't feel so relentless.

Our own era is what the Spanish writer Antonio Muñoz Molina captures in his newest novel, "To Walk Alone in the Crowd" (Farrar, Straus & Giroux), now published in a deft translation by Guillermo Bleichmar. Billed as a kind of homage to flânerie, the book reads more like a cautionary tale about the endangerment of the art of idle walking. Feeling anxious, and spending too much time on his phone, the novel's unnamed, very Muñoz Molina-like protagonist sets out on a stroll and is struck by the torrent of language all around him. "How can I have walked down this street so many times without noticing the river of spoken and printed words I was traversing, the racket, the crowds, the clothes in the window of a dingy store," he wonders. He decides to start rambling, in the hope of becoming "all eyes and ears." He walks around major metropolises: Madrid, New York, Paris, Lisbon. Seeking a "music of words" that belongs "simultaneously to poetry and to everyday speech," the narrator accepts each leaflet handed to him and registers every ad he sees. Stopping at cafés to take notes, he records surrounding voices and ambient sounds with his iPhone. All this activity he cryptically refers to as "the task."

Muñoz Molina, who has lived in Madrid and New York, is greatly celebrated in his native country. His previous novel, "Like a Fading Shadow," was short-listed for the Man Booker International Prize in 2018. That book mixed fiction, history, and autobiography in an account that lingers on the ten days James Earl Ray spent in Lisbon in 1968, after assassinating Martin Luther King, Jr. "To Walk Alone in the Crowd" draws on history in a very different mode: in between walks, its narrator considers the lives of past literary wanderers, focussing mainly on Baudelaire, Benjamin, Thomas De Quincey, and Edgar Allan Poe. He ruminates on the connections among the group: Baudelaire learned how to see his city by translating De Quincey on London, and Poe on "an imagined Paris"; Benjamin translated Baudelaire.

These excursions into literary history lend the proceedings a certain gravitas, but they also highlight the relative monotony of the narrator's own wanderings—the world that he finds on the street is dishearteningly similar to the one on his phone. Advertisements no longer restrict themselves to billboards and storefronts but take up an ever-larger portion of what used to be public space. They flicker on screens that tower over city streets and plazas; their coaxing imperatives evoke the dull urgency of clickbait, and employ a blank universalism. "Old people in advertisements smile with a certain optimism," the narrator notes. "Young people laugh and laugh, opening their mouths wide and showing their gums and tongues." The actual people whom he observes frequently disappoint and disgust him. They eat chicken from Popeyes while ignoring a man who lies on a sidewalk, his chest heaving; they avoid so much as a twitch of acknowledgment when sharing an elevator with a stranger. New York, the narrator says, is "a city of zombies glued to cell phone screens." In the age of Google Maps, it is difficult to follow Benjamin's exhortation to get lost.

"The city is an organism that prospers and persists in harsh conditions and that all of a sudden may collapse without anyone having realized the approaching disaster or the speed of degradation," Muñoz Molina wrote in an op-ed for the Spanish newspaper *El País,* in 2014. The coronavirus pandemic has caused many small cafés and shops to close, and has emptied apartments of laid-off workers, who can no longer afford them. It has intensified the retreat into digital life. The form of Muñoz Molina's novel mirrors the transformation of the city into a monotonous set of disconnected spaces. It is composed of single-paragraph fragments, each of which begins with a bolded sentence that seems to be taken from the verbal scraps that the narrator collects: advertisements, headlines, public-service announcements. ("Take a bit of our taste with you." "Creepy clowns terrorize Great Britain." "If you see something, say something.") The protagonist walks and reflects in a seemingly improvisational manner, occasionally flipping from the first person to the third person. He doesn't take in the landscape so much as itemize it. Apart from him, the closest thing in the book to a recurring character is a mysterious figure, possibly a double, whom he glimpses on the street and in cafés.

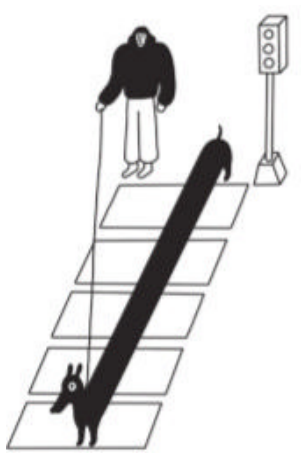
The use of fragments is not uncommon among flâneurs, but Muñoz Molina's set pieces read as mere compilations of visual and sonic data, with no thread looping through them, no enigma being circled. Bleichmar, the translator,

is meticulous in his attention to the rhythms of the author's Spanish. The voice of the narrator does not call to mind any of the book's literary heroes, nor does it evoke more recent literary flâneurs, such as Amit Chaudhuri, Rebecca Solnit, and Teju Cole. Rather, he sounds like a character in a novel by Don DeLillo: "I hear the clicking of bats finding their way through the air by echolocation. Many more vibrations than my crude human ears can detect are rippling simultaneously through the air at this very moment, a thick web of radio signals spreading everywhere, carrying all the cell phone conversations taking place right now." It is less the voice of urban wandering than of twenty-first-century paranoia; the anxiety that the narrator sought to conquer seems to linger, despite his claims to the contrary. The autumnal melancholy one expects in a solitary rambler is instead a wintry misanthropy, leading not to observational insight but to sneers.

In "Beneath My Feet" and "Sauntering," wanderers find, again and again, ways of venturing into the past. Edith Wharton, writing about a stroll through Italy, notes the exuberant growth of the foliage in certain ravines, and remarks that the same quarries once hosted torture and killing. "Time has perhaps never done a more poetic thing than in turning these bare unshaded pits of death, where the Greek captives of Salamis died under the lash of the Sicilian slave-driver and the arrows of the Sicilian sun, into deep cool wells of shade and verdure," she writes. (The passage, excerpted in "Sauntering," is from "Italian Backgrounds," a little-read collection of Wharton's travel writing.) Such backward glances are sometimes interwoven with more intimate memories. In a passage from "Poland Revisited," included in "Sauntering," Joseph Conrad shows his oldest son around Kraków, the city of his childhood, and marvels alternately at the "unchangeableness" and the "extreme mutability" of things. He follows his memories back to his father's last days, recalling the nights he spent crying himself to sleep after tiptoeing into his father's room and kissing him good night. Later, images come to him from his father's funeral—"the clumsy swaying" of the hearse, "the flames of tapers passing under the low archway" of the cemetery gate. If a distinctive trait of the flâneur is the interest she takes in the lives of others, that interest includes not only lives glimpsed through shop windows or in doorways but also those partly hidden behind the veil of the past.

The most captivating moments in "To Walk Alone in the Crowd" come when the narrator lets memories seep through the barrage of pushy advertisements and pleading headlines. In the book's affecting final pages, he remembers his transformation as a young writer, in the small city of Granada, after first reading De Quincey and Baudelaire. He experienced "a sudden awakening into the world's immediate reality," seeing the city for the first time, despite having lived there for seven years. But such personal passages are brief; they never last long enough to give a more textured sense of the narrator's life. Similarly, there is a frustrating terseness to his historical musings, and a lot of tour-guide trivia: Brassaï went through that door to visit Picasso; Balzac lived around here; Oscar Wilde once checked into that hotel. This feels like a more cultured version of his constant data collection.

Rather than gaining the depth of perspective that the past provides, "To Walk Alone in the Crowd" seems to cave in to the present, mimicking its superficiality and self-importance, channelling its short attention span and its addiction to topicality. (Trump is a recurring fixation.) The book's title comes to suggest not the half belonging that Woolf attributes to the street rambler but a more common, and more contemporary, form of limbo: staring at a phone pinging with news alerts, ads perpetually popping up, stuck between solitude and collectivity and never reaching a true sense of either. "The trivial and the apocalyptic appeared in such close proximity that they sometimes seemed to turn into each other," the narrator observes. The novel replicates this condition rather than resisting it.



One morning in New York City, when the sun has come out and the snow has started to melt, the narrator scans the terrain:

> A stark air of extinction clings especially to things that have only partially emerged: a woolen glove like a hand coming out of the earth, a Dunkin' Donuts plastic coffee cup with a straw still sticking through the lid, the corner of a flip-top box of Marlboros, a ghastly toilet scrubber, the broken skeleton of an umbrella, a bird cage, fortunately empty, a bucket of KFC with a few leftover pieces nibbled by rats, a whole rat, still frozen, emerging from the snow, a pile of dog shit, a woolen cap, a plastic fork, a crushed pigeon, a baby diaper, a sponge covered in hair, a microwave, the black suction cup of a toilet plunger, thousands of cigarette butts.

Perhaps climate change is on the narrator's mind; many of the headlines he records concern that all-consuming threat. Whatever the source of his malaise, the flâneur's classic gesture of unearthing leads, here, not to imagined human stories or a contemplation of the city's haunted past but to a catalogue of used-up products, a few marked by multinational brand names, none pointing to anything beyond itself. Throughout the book, it is difficult to tell which city the wandering narrator is in unless he explicitly names it. There may be a tacit critique in this approach: have big cities across the globe become products, too, soulless and interchangeable? Still, there is something self-defeating in an homage to flânerie that offers little sense of place.

What is really missing, though, is humanity—or specific, ordinary instances of it. Muñoz Molina's narrator embodies the detachment of the flâneur but not his capacity for empathy. He tries to be "all eyes and ears." This is a different goal than, as Woolf has it, briefly inhabiting "the bodies and minds of others." Such imaginative habitation is why Woolf went walking, and how she escaped the self. It is also much of the reason for reading fiction. As Woolf writes, near the end of "Street Haunting," after noting the many alternative lives one can envision in a city like London, "What greater delight and wonder can there be than to leave the straight lines of personality and deviate into those footpaths that lead beneath brambles and thick tree trunks into the heart of the forest where live those wild beasts, our fellow men?" ♦

MUSICAL EVENTS

A DELICATE BALANCE

Herbert Blomstedt's readings of Beethoven deftly combine vigor and lyricism.

BY ALEX ROSS

The ninety-four-year-old Swedish conductor Herbert Blomstedt has achieved a longevity that is almost unprecedented in his profession. Various conductors have remained active past the age of ninety—Leopold Stokowski made it to ninety-five—but no nonagenarian has sustained a schedule anything like Blomstedt's. Earlier this month, he spent nearly two weeks at Tanglewood, working with the Boston Symphony and with students from the Tanglewood Music Center. At the end of the summer, he will take the Vienna Philharmonic on an eight-city European tour. In the fall, he goes to Dresden, Berlin, Tokyo, Leipzig, Munich, Bamberg, Oslo, and Paris. More American dates are slated for next year, including a return to the San Francisco Symphony, which he led from 1985 to 1995. With the recent retirement of Bernard Haitink, who is ninety-two, Blomstedt is effectively ensconced as the elder sage of the podium.

The assumption that conductors of great age radiate incalculable wisdom is a dubious one, smacking of musty personality worship. Then again, the classical-music world makes an equally dubious cult of fresh-faced youth. The esteem in which orchestras and audiences now hold Blomstedt is a belated reward for a resolutely unshowy musician who has gone about his business decade after decade. What he offers, above all, is a kind of preternatural rightness: no gesture feels out of place, no gesture feels routine.

So it was with Beethoven's Seventh Symphony, which the Boston Symphony played under Blomstedt's direction at Tanglewood. Like most conductors of any stature, he has recorded the complete Beethoven symphonies; indeed, he has traversed them twice, first with the Dresden Staatskapelle and then with the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra. The Dresden version, dating from 1975 to 1980, is as sure-footed a Beethoven cycle as can be found. It rivals the authority of contemporaneous efforts by Leonard Bernstein and Herbert von Karajan while avoiding their intrusive mannerisms. The Leipzig set, recorded between 2014 and 2017, documents Blomstedt's latter-day preference for cleaner textures and quicker tempos. Improbably, it is just as absorbing as the beloved earlier version. Very few conductors have produced *two* Beethoven cycles that can serve as benchmarks for future interpretations.

At Tanglewood, Blomstedt maintained his crisp Leipzig tempos, though he may have slowed the pace just a little in the Allegretto. Superficially, his approach matched the prevailing fashion in Beethoven: with the days of late-Romantic expansiveness long gone, conductors these days vie with one another to see who can drive ahead most impetuously and jab at accents most aggressively. Brisk, brusque Beethoven has, in fact, become the norm, as predictable as the old Wagnerian wallow. Blomstedt is aware of the pitfalls. At the dress rehearsal, he stopped several times to hum passages to the orchestra, seeking more varied, songful phrasing.

The result was a performance that surged with vitality without boxing the ears. Balances were handled with particular care, so that solo voices, especially in the winds, held their own against swirling strings and crunching brass. In the opening bars, the first big A-major chord landed with a grand thump, but the tuttis in the third, fifth, and seventh bars were a shade more recessed, ceding space to the intervening oboe, clarinet, horn, and flute solos. For comparison, I turned to a recent recording by

At ninety-four, the Swedish conductor has become the elder sage of the podium.

ILLUSTRATION BY LU ZHANG

the gifted but erratic young conductor Teodor Currentzis and his musicAeterna ensemble. There, all the tuttis are hammered in bizarrely brutal fashion.

Throughout the symphony, Blomstedt found an equilibrium between headlong force and melancholy lyricism. In the Allegretto, few conductors can resist unleashing a juggernaut of sound when the processional main theme rises to its climactic fortissimo, but here again Blomstedt held back, making sure that the countermelody in the first violins came through clearly, with its legato all aglow. The strategy of restraint achieved a glorious payoff in the last pages of the finale, when the orchestra let loose with a frothing energy that bordered on animal joy.

After the performance, I went backstage for what I assumed would be a brief chat with Blomstedt. He had the mien of a bookish village pastor, his face free of sweat. I had resolved not to ask the obvious, dumb question: How can he still be so vigorous at his age? Some have credited his pious, abstemious habits: raised in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, he has never had a drink or eaten meat. But, as he told Michael Cooper, of the *Times*, in 2017, "That's not the reason. It's a gift." Blomstedt added wryly, "Churchill drank lots of whiskey and smoked enormous big cigars, and he lived to be ninety or so."

Perhaps one factor behind Blomstedt's longevity is his restless, inquisitive relationship with even the most familiar scores. When I asked about the evolution of his Beethoven, he said, "It changes with every new performance, a little bit. But it especially changed when the new edition, the Bärenreiter, came out, around 2000." In that edition, Beethoven's metronome markings appear at the top of the page, not in a footnote. "They're not sort of optional," Blomstedt said. "They're binding—perhaps not to the letter but to the spirit." Like many musicians, he once considered those tempos impossibly fast, but original-instrument performances led by John Eliot Gardiner and by Roger Norrington helped convince him otherwise. Indeed, in the case of the "Eroica" Symphony, the markings produce a formal balance that is lacking in the monumental readings of Wilhelm Furtwängler, whom Blomstedt admired in his youth. "I felt as a young musician that the finale was weaker," he told me. "Now, in tempo, it is the crown." He sang themes from the first and last movements, demonstrating the continuities.

What guidance does Blomstedt give to the Boston players? "Well, they are used to the faster tempos," he replied. "You in America are lucky that you got Toscanini—he was very modern in that way." Other issues occupied Blomstedt's attention. He sang the rising-and-falling second theme from Beethoven's Violin Concerto, which was also on the program, with Joshua Bell as the soloist. The falling fourth at the end of the first phrase, he explained, should be "DEE daw"—stressed, unstressed. "But they play it DEE DAW. Like BAW-STON. If they would speak the way they play, everyone would laugh. I try to work as much as possible on that. I try to show it with my hand. The return I get is when I notice that the musicians are happy, and they do it even more beautifully than I could imagine. It is a two-way thing—I give something to them, and they give me even more back."

During a break in the dress rehearsal, Blomstedt had remained on the podium for several minutes, conversing with Haldan Martinson and Julianne Lee, two principals from the second-violin section. They brought up a passage in the recapitulation of the Seventh's first movement, in which the winds jump prematurely into D major while the strings stay in A. Can this be right? "It's an interesting question," Blomstedt told me afterward. "Of course it's right. It is like the 'Eroica,' where in the first movement the horn comes in in E-flat while everyone else is still on the dominant. There are a few other examples like this in Beethoven, where some parts of the orchestra pull the whole thing along. So here the woodwinds are saying, 'Come here, we want to come in *this* direction.'"

We went on talking for nearly an hour: about the upcoming Bruckner bicentennial, in 2024 (Blomstedt is booked up through that year); about his notoriously acid-tongued Swedish colleague Sixten Ehrling, who died in 2005; about his favorite Swedish composers, from the innovative Romantic symphonist Franz Berwald to the eclectic modernist Ingvar Lidholm. But I felt that I should wrap up the conversation, mainly because I was ready for bed. Blomstedt stepped out of his dressing room to greet a young conductor, Felix Mildenberger, who was serving as his travel assistant, and who was also looking a bit sleepy. The sage strode down the hall, as agelessly robust as the symphony he had just conducted. ♦

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CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Kaamran Hafeez, must be received by Sunday, August 29th. The finalists in the August 16th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the September 13th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST

" "

THE FINALISTS

"Now, if you'll just yank away the tablecloth."
Jason Ankele, Alexandria, Va.

"I think I got the waiter's attention."
Elliot Silberberg, Steamboat Springs, Colo.

"My last boyfriend died in a tragic dining accident."
David Steffenson, Roseville, Calif.

THE WINNING CAPTION

"I know how you feel. This used to be Florida."
Michael Migliaccio, Croton-on-Hudson, N.Y.

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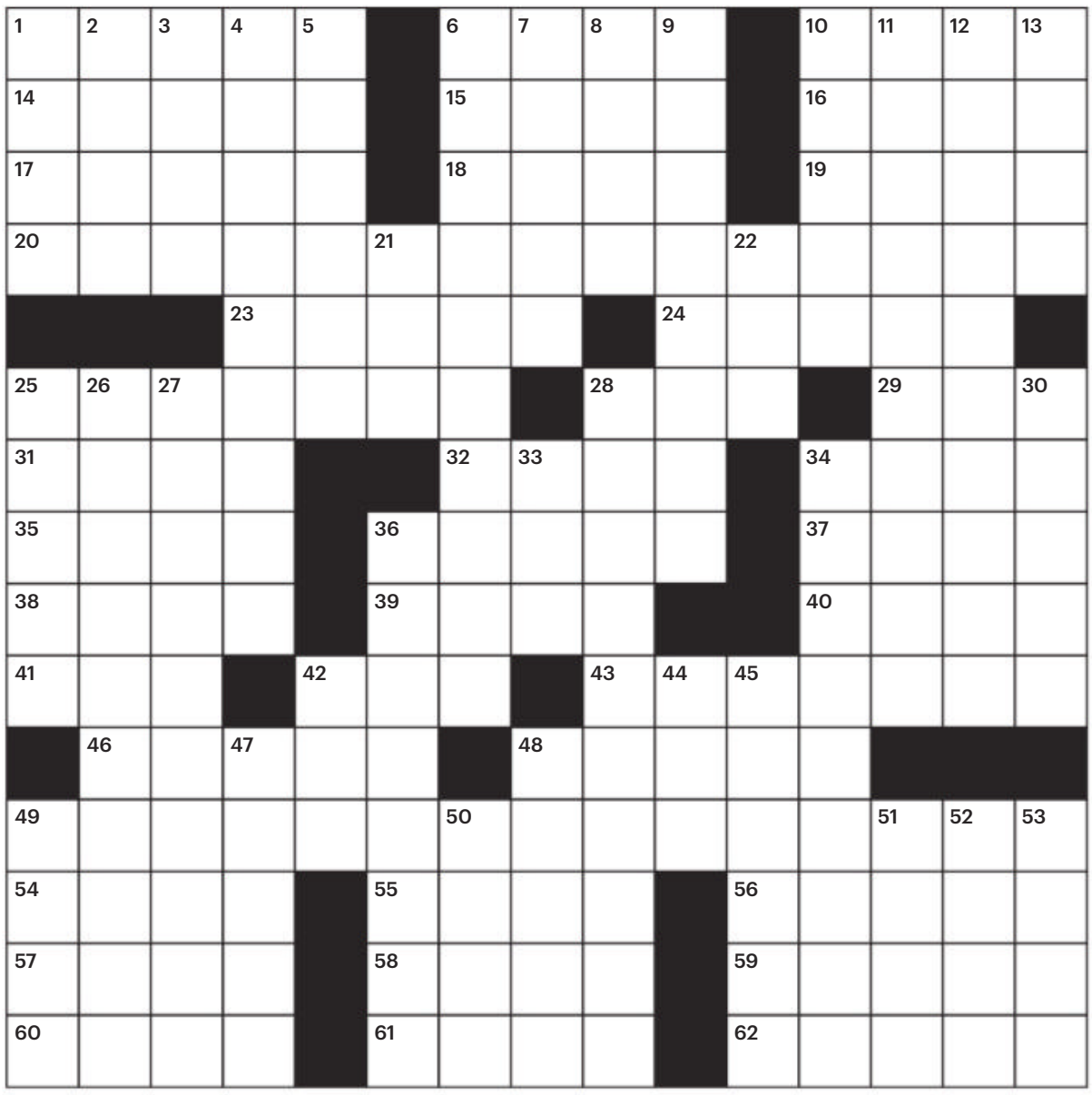
PUZZLES & GAMES DEPT.

THE CROSSWORD

A lightly challenging puzzle.

BY ROBYN WEINTRAUB



ACROSS

1 More than a trend
6 Howard, Spelman, or Morehouse: Abbr.
10 BMW subsidiary that's bigger than its name suggests
14 One going downhill fast
15 Nation south of the Caspian Sea
16 Actress Mireille of "The Killing"
17 Skylit lobbies
18 Gives a bad review
19 "Give this to," on a memo
20 "Weird, isn't it?"
23 Mount
24 Buddy of "The Beverly Hillbillies"
25 Apt anagram of "enraged"
28 Pixar short featuring an anthropomorphic steamed bun
29 Strong cleaner
31 Garr of "Young Frankenstein"
32 Short piece for a clarinettist?
34 Recaps, with "up"
35 Is in the red
36 ___-turvy
37 Casual pace for Secretariat
38 "No way, Sergey!"
39 Leave out
40 Hundred ___ Wood (home of Piglet and Pooh)
41 Ages and ages
42 Busy one in a garden
43 Move like a mamba
46 Helicopter topper
48 Sierra ___
49 "Told you so!"
54 First female Prime Minister of Israel
55 Simon with an eponymous Broadway theatre
56 River that runs through Rome
57 Event for a teen-age king and queen
58 Strong wind
59 Join
60 Employee I.D.s
61 Sirius or Bellatrix
62 Early American seamstress Ross

DOWN

1 Lobster or crab part
2 The "R" of R.B.G.
3 Taj Mahal city
4 Loanword meaning "the spirit of the time"
5 Aid for many crossword solvers
6 Chariot-racing arena of ancient Greece
7 Muscles
8 "Mommy, ___ keep him?"
9 Not sure-footed
10 Skewered offerings at a churrascaria
11 High and dry
12 "That ends today!"
13 "___ She Lovely" (Stevie Wonder classic)
21 Indigenous people of the Beehive State
22 "Euphoria" network
25 Advice to a sinner
26 Constituents of Chuck Schumer and Kirsten Gillibrand
27 Scallion by another name
28 Lofty goal for an aspiring novelist
30 Fragrant organic compound
33 Commercial lead-in to Pen
34 Spot for a "Welcome to . . ." sign
36 Jewelry typically not worn in cold weather
42 Yo-Yo Ma might take one or use one
44 Response to a humorous text
45 Where to find the butcher, the baker, and the candlestick maker, per the nursery rhyme
47 Semesters
48 Former boxing champ Ali
49 Little rascals
50 Suckling site
51 Passing remarks?
52 Safety equipment for trapeze artists
53 Jennifer of "Dirty Dancing"

Solution to the previous puzzle:

A	C	R	E		I	A	M	B			P	S	S	T
B	R	E	A	S	T	F	E	E	D		A	C	H	Y
B	E	A	R	W	I	T	H	M	E		W	R	A	P
A	D	D	L	E	S		T	O	N	I		E	G	O
			G	A	N	J	A	A	N	D	H	E	S	S
S	T	A	R	T	T	O		N	Y	L	O	N		
C	A	R	E	S	S	E	D			E	R	T	E	S
A	R	M	Y		O	L	D	E	R		N	I	T	E
N	E	W	T	S			S	T	A	T	E	M	A	P
		R	E	E	D	S		T	R	I	T	E	S	T
T	H	E	A	T	R	E	G	O	E	R	S			
W	A	S		H	E	P	A		F	I	N	S	T	A
E	T	T	U		A	I	R	L	I	N	E	H	U	B
E	E	L	S		D	A	T	I	N	G	S	I	T	E
T	R	E	E			S	H	E	D		T	A	U	T

Find more puzzles and this week's solution at **newyorker.com/crossword**

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Top: **North Truro (Green Sun)**, 2016–2020, oil on canvas, 20 x 28 inches. © 2021 Mitchell Johnson.
Above: **Race Point Bench Six**, 2021, 20 x 30 inches, oil on linen. © 2021 Mitchell Johnson.

Truro Center for the Arts at Castle Hill presents *Mitchell Johnson: Sixteen Years in Truro, Selected Paintings 2005–2021*, September 7–17, 2021. Johnson's paintings are known for their unique approach to color and shape and have been exhibited in New York (Tatistcheff), San Francisco (Campbell-Thiebaud), and Los Angeles (Terrence Rogers Fine Art), as well as in group shows at Ogunquit Museum of Art, Jundt Museum of Art at Gonzaga, Tucson Museum of Art, Bakersfield Museum of Art, and New Mexico Museum of Art. The most recent museum acquisitions were by Museo Morandi in Bologna, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna in Rome, Tampa Museum of Art, and the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. Johnson moved to the Bay Area in 1990 after finishing his MFA at Parsons in New York where he studied with many former students of Hans Hofmann: Jane Freilicher, Paul Resika, Larry Rivers, Nell Blaine, Wolf Kahn, and Leland Bell. Castle Hill gallery hours are available at www.mitchelljohnson.com, and a printed exhibit catalog is for sale at Amazon.com.